

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



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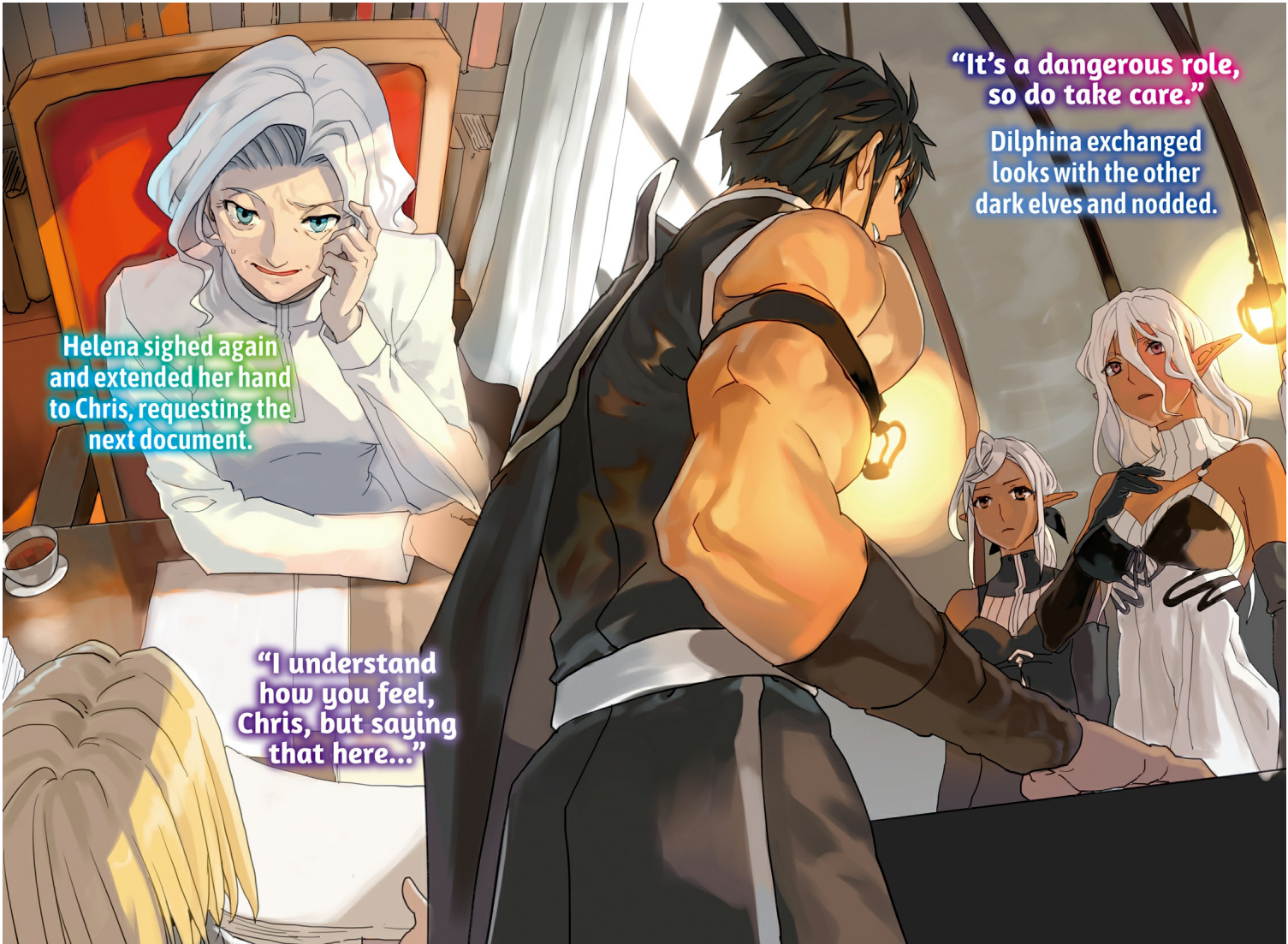




The figure
remained
silent as they
casually
removed
their hood.

Seeing her
visage, Adolf
swallowed
nervously.

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



"It's a dangerous role,
so do take care."

Dilphina exchanged
looks with the other
dark elves and nodded.

Helena sighed again
and extended her hand
to Chris, requesting the
next document.

"I understand
how you feel,
Chris, but saying
that here..."



“Let’s
do this,
then.”

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1

COUNT WINZER'S ESTATE

CHAPTER 2

BETRAYAL AND FRIENDSHIP

CHAPTER 3

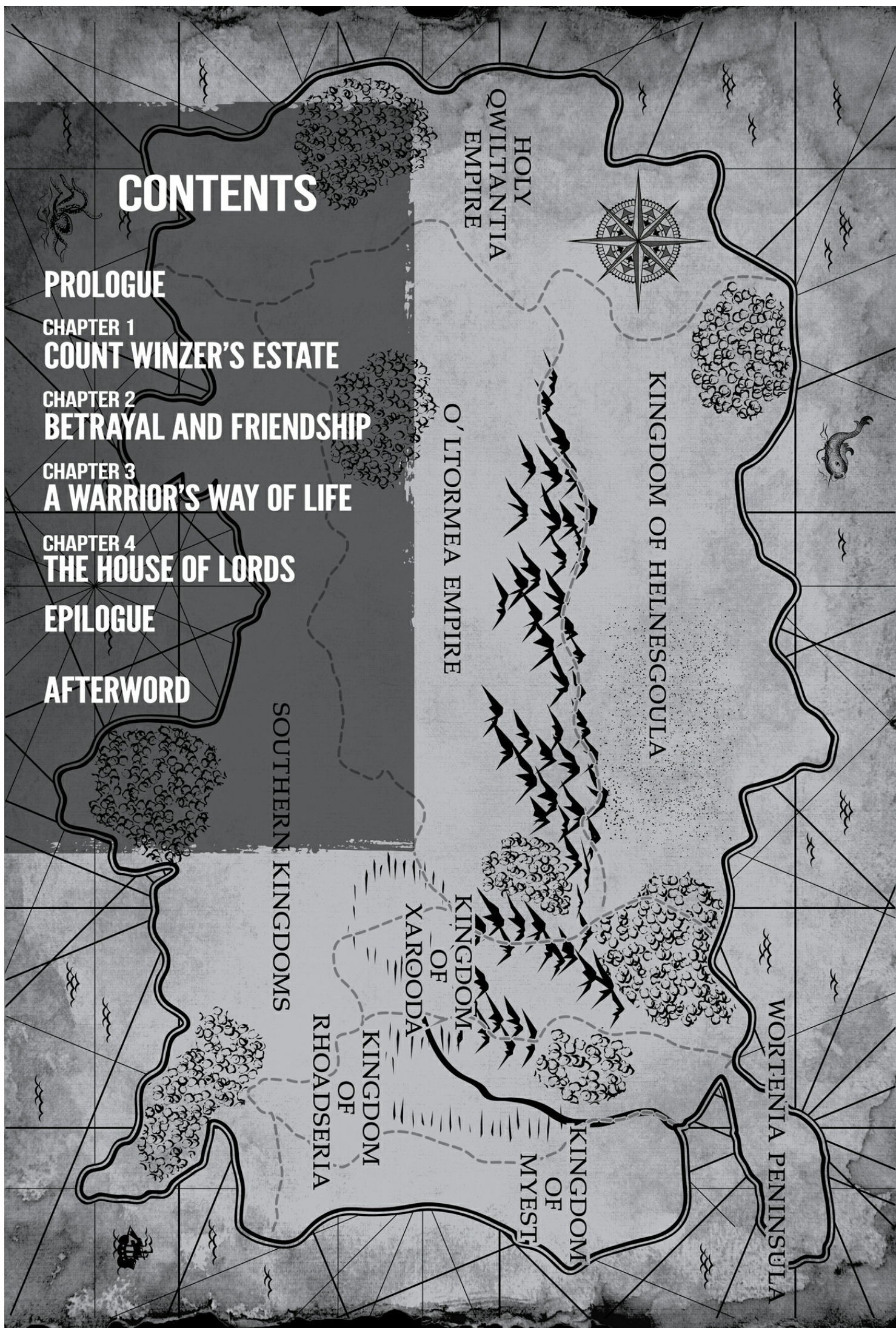
A WARRIOR'S WAY OF LIFE

CHAPTER 4

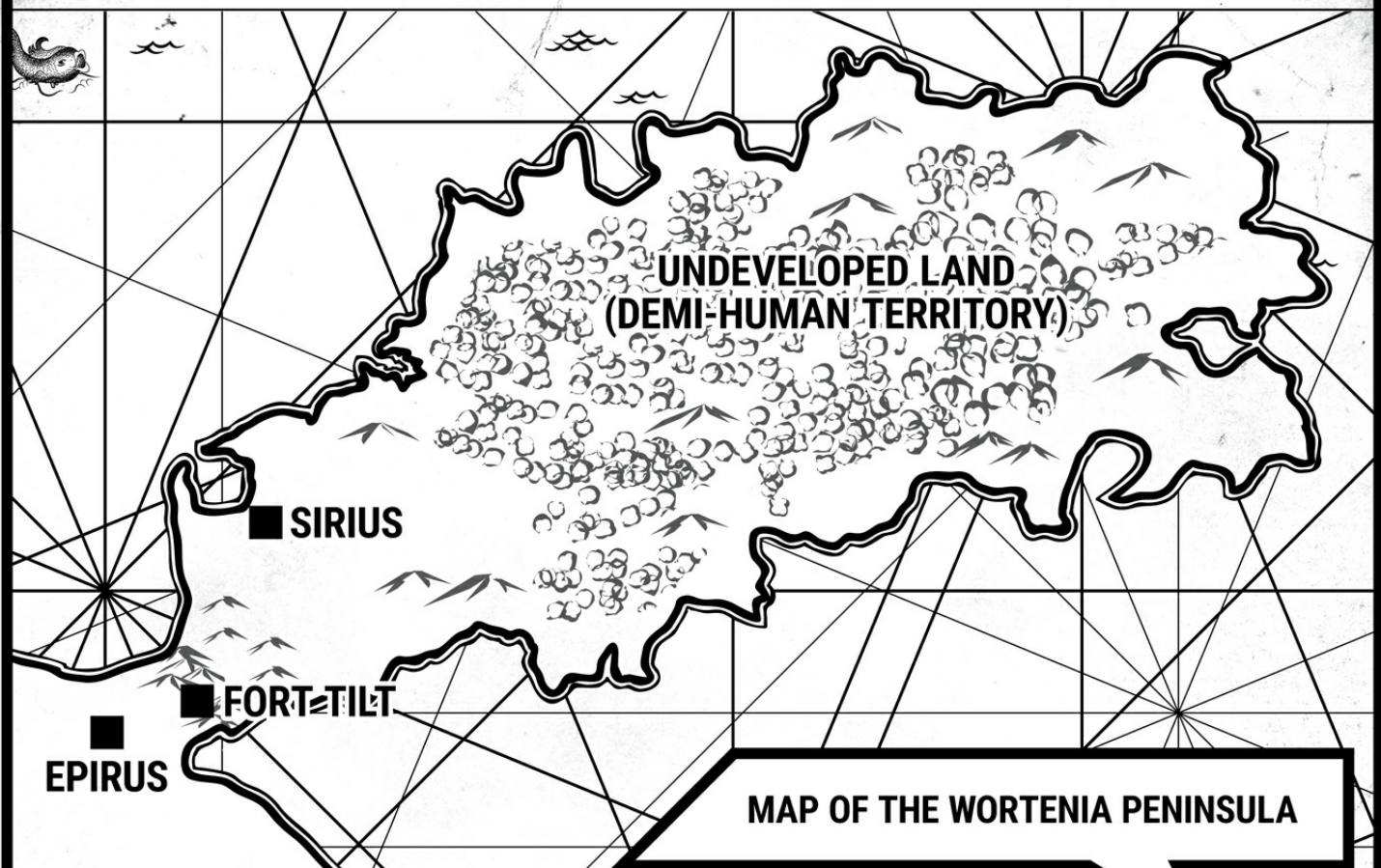
THE HOUSE OF LORDS

EPILOGUE

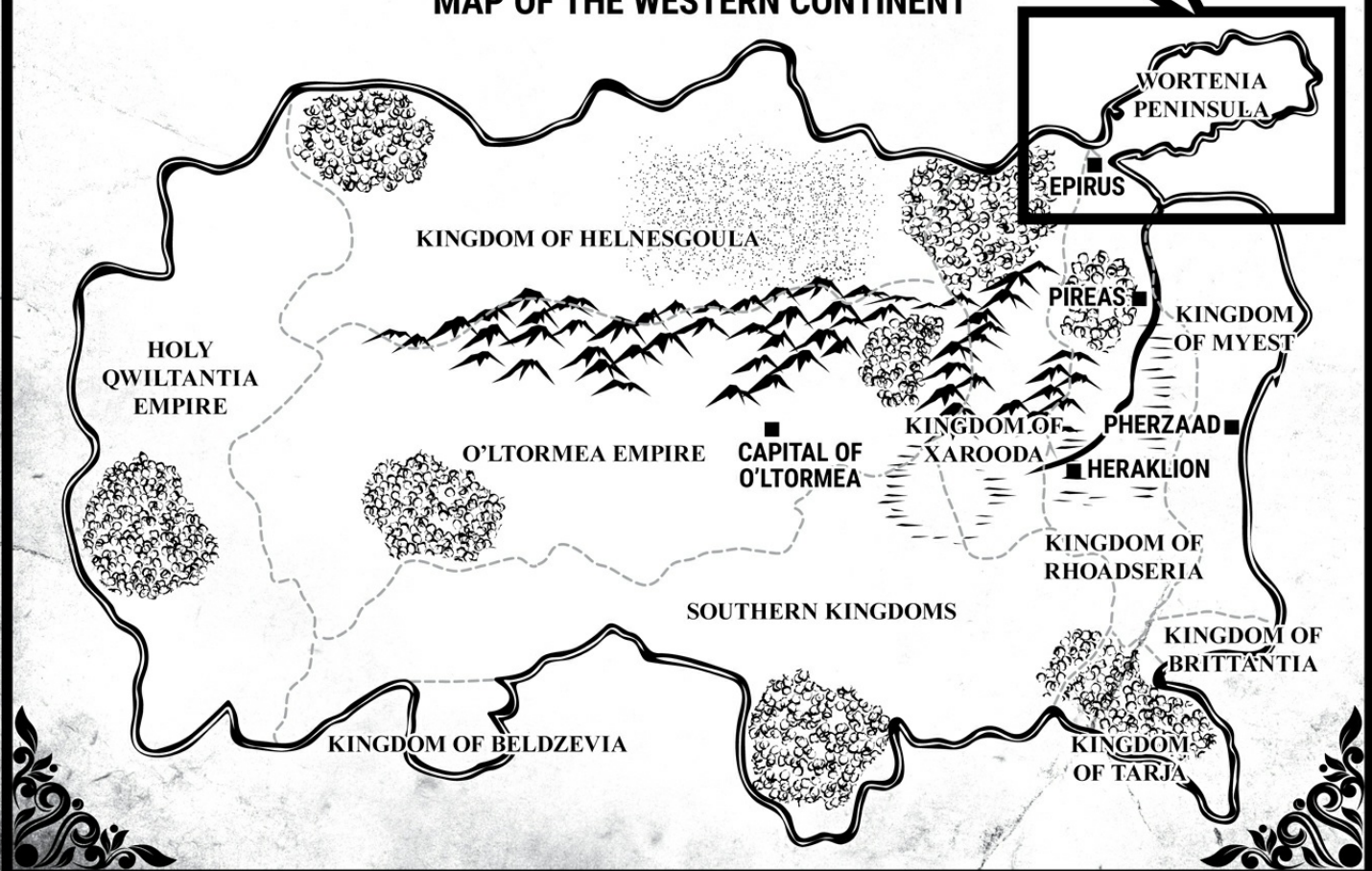
AFTERWORD



WORLD MAP of 《RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR》



MAP OF THE WESTERN CONTINENT



Prologue

At the southern tip of Rhoadseria, one of the three kingdoms in the western continent's eastern regions, countless figures stood on a hill to the north of Galatia, a city located on the border between Rhoadseria and Tarja.

It was a dark night. A thick layer of clouds hung in the sky, blocking off the moonlight and the stars. It was a night governed by monsters, especially at a spot like this, far from the barrier pillars that protected the cities and highways.

However, this place was even more desolate than most. There were no herbs growing here that could be used for medicine, and no monsters around that needed slaying. As a result, no mercenaries or adventurers would willingly come to this place. The only ones who would were those who sought a dark place to remain hidden from prying eyes—much like the figures on this hill right now.

At the front stood a man with his arms crossed as he gazed up at the sky. He was 180 centimeters tall, and he wore leather armor and a mask to hide his features, both an inky black color.



Even with his features hidden, his menacing air was palpable to all around him, like a blade glinting in the night. This man had clearly survived more battlefields than most people. Beneath his armor, which had been made using the Organization's finest techniques, countless scars riddled his body, from bullet wounds to lacerations to even a scar from the fragments of a rocket fired his way. He was a seasoned warrior if there ever was one.

The man's name was Samuel Kinkaid. He was leading the Hunting Dogs on this particular raid.

A completely dark night. It reminds me of that one time.

A certain memory surfaced in Samuel's mind. It was from before he'd been summoned to this Earth. Back then, he'd been part of a covert operation in Afghanistan conducted by the United States of America, the world superpower. He'd been a captain in the United States Marine Corps Force Reconnaissance, and had been involved in an infiltration operation with his squadmates to collect crucial information.

Present-day Afghanistan is not a wealthy country. Or rather, it couldn't become wealthy.

The country that would become Afghanistan has existed since ancient times, but it only took that name halfway through the nineteenth century. However, a portion of its land had been home to the Indus Valley Civilization, one of the four great civilizations of the ancient world. It is also a relatively large region, roughly two times larger than Japan, but it's equal in size to its neighbors Iran and Pakistan, so it's not especially vast. And on top of that, recent surveys have identified oil reserves.

Since Afghanistan is a landlocked country, transportation is limited to ground and air travel—a major disadvantage. Flying is by far the fastest mode of travel, but when it comes to ferrying large quantities of supplies, ships are still preferable.

Afghanistan is a multiethnic country, which has led to conflicts within its population. But there are many countries in central Asia, and all around the world, that share this issue. And though it is far from perfect, it does have its good points. For example, it has the Buddhas of Bamiyan, a cultural heritage

site from the Ancient Orient period that draws in tourists from around the globe. If they were to make use of these cultural assets and their abundance of underground resources, they would match the financial success of their Middle-Eastern neighbors.

But Afghanistan is more than just cultural heritage sites and oil. Throughout its long and storied history, its land was stained with the blood of its people as they fought against a multitude of invaders. Its past is riddled with many dynasties and countries that took control of the land—the first being the Persian Achaemenid Empire, which reigned over the Ancient Orient.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Afghanistan won their independence from the British Empire. They've since gone through many revolutions, only for the Soviet Union, which competed with the United States for control over the world, to ravage their land. After that, they fell under the de facto control of the Taliban, a fundamentalist Islamic organization.

Thinking back to the country he'd served for years, Samuel felt a small lump in throat. He'd gone to Afghanistan under the orders of his homeland, and the reason why was by no means admirable. Indeed, the United States was greatly criticized for its operations in Afghanistan. People who'd never stepped out of their comfort zones and who ignored the weight of reality loudly denounced their actions. But those people knew nothing of the world's cruelty or its coldheartedness. Only those who were there could know.

Someone had to trudge through the muck and the mud, so Samuel didn't regret anything he and his comrades had done back then. After all, they'd been defending their homeland. Still, after witnessing the daily lives of Afghanistan's people, Samuel couldn't deny he felt conflicted.

Maybe that feels like a contradiction, and that's exactly what it is. If someone wants to call me a hypocrite, well, they're not wrong.

On the other hand, this was part of what made him human. In truth, he shared responsibility for the plight Afghanistan was in right now, even if he wished he didn't.

No matter what I think, it won't change the fact that the world powers toyed with them, and for many years, they couldn't achieve the peace they needed to

develop financially...as sad as that may be.

Perhaps what Samuel felt was pity. But as a soldier, his instincts compelled him to make split-second judgment calls.

In the end, being weak left one at the mercy of those stronger than them, be it individuals or entire countries. Those who weren't bright enough to know they were being duped were doomed to dance to the crafty manipulator's tune.

Even here, in this other world, that truth still rang true. Ideals like national peace and human rights were nonexistent here. It was a land of carnage where countries fought nonstop for their own profit. If they won, they would get glory and prosperity. If they lost, the country itself could be wiped off the map. Survival of the fittest reigned supreme.

In that regard, this world was no different from the battlefields Samuel knew. The places he fought were likewise spaces where the platitudes of peace and equality held no meaning. However, the similarities didn't end there.

The living standards here are like the Middle Ages. Even that war-torn country is better off. If nothing else, they have electricity and cars. There's a world of difference, but...

In this world, they would think electricity was simply energy, and verbal thaumaturgy had spells that used lightning. But even if they could conjure lightning and use electricity to an extent, they could only use it as a weapon to slay an enemy. They couldn't use it as a tool to move things the way modern society did. The closest thing they had was endowed thaumaturgy, which used prana as an energy source.

The lack of modernity here made Samuel feel almost nostalgic.

This really does remind me of Afghanistan.

Not all of Afghanistan's roads were paved, nor were there many street lights. Furthermore, Samuel remembered Afghanistan in a time of war, during which the cities' power supplies were limited. Many of the soldiers he faced hid in caves dotting the wasteland, or hideouts in remote locations. Places like those only had the moonlight and the twinkling stars as light sources. So despite how different Afghanistan was from here, Samuel felt right at home, standing here

in the dark night.

Yeah, it's similar. Some things are different, but...

Many things were different—the food, the clothes, and the language to name a few. One could list countless dissimilarities. This world was behind Samuel's in almost every field imaginable. The living standards were low, and chemistry hadn't been discovered yet, so it was clear that it was far less developed here.

But this world is far beyond mine in some things. Like magic.

The field of language translation was particularly advanced. Otherworlders could communicate without any difficulty, which led many to mistakenly believe that the people here spoke the same language. That wasn't the case, though. The summoning ritual included a spell that enabled their minds to instinctively interpret the words.

The Organization included people of all ethnicities, from Americans like Samuel to Chinese and Japanese people. One member was from Uganda on Africa's eastern coast and spoke Swahili. Even so, the Organization—with its multicultural, multilingual membership—had never struggled to communicate.

Nowadays, smartphones came equipped with translation applications, and people could carry portable dictionaries in their pockets. But even with those advances, this world was still superior. No application or dictionary could automatically translate another person's words without any extra clicks or actions, nor could either allow one to converse as if they were speaking in their mother tongue.

However, the biggest difference between the two worlds was the fact that Samuel could operate at night without night-vision goggles.

Thaumaturgy, be it verbal or martial, it's quite convenient. It doesn't really sit well with me that I don't know what principles make it do the things it does, though.

Night-vision goggles usually applied a green filter because it was set to the color in the middle wavelength of visible light, and it was the easiest color for the human eye to perceive. The same reasoning explained why it was best to look at something green when one's eyes were tired.

Though he wasn't wearing night-vision goggles right now, Samuel could see his surroundings perfectly well and in full color. Even the most advanced night-vision devices would make one's vision feel off, but there was no such problem with thaumaturgy.

The single flaw thaumaturgy had was that it had to be learned. Also, it consumed one's prana. Since Samuel hadn't gained the use of the sixth chakra—the Ajna Chakra—yet, he couldn't consistently reinforce his eyesight. If that was all he focused on, the effect could last for two days—assuming he wasn't doing anything else. If, however, he reinforced his body for combat, it was doubtful if the effect would last half a day. Still, the positives greatly outweighed those negatives.

We can use thaumaturgy to reinforce our eyes, so everything is going smoothly for us. Normal soldiers have to carry around torches, though.

Only a small percentage of people could use thaumaturgy. Those who couldn't had to make do with living standards similar to the fifteenth century up to the early eighteenth century. For them, candles and torches were the primary sources of light. In other words, since they didn't know the convenience of the light bulb, humans still struggled to operate outside after nightfall. One could carry lamps or candles, but those weren't necessarily cheap, and most commoners believed in conserving what few resources they had. They just went to bed early. They would get up at dawn and finish their work and go home at sunset. Then they would eat their dinners and go to sleep. Hardly any would loiter outside at night, especially not on such a dark and moonless night.

A life of working at dawn and going home at sunset...

Modern society had TVs and computers, so there was no shortage of things to do regardless of the hour. If one were suddenly hungry in the middle of the night, it was easy enough to get something at a twenty-four hour convenience store or an eatery. Perhaps those weren't the healthiest meals, but they were filling.

Things were different in this world. There were no televisions or computers, and no stores to satisfy midnight hunger pangs. The majority of people weren't

literate to begin with, so they couldn't entertain themselves with books. To them, there was rarely a reason to light an expensive lamp or candle at night. The only ones who truly required light at that time were the old and sickly, who required constant care.

This meant that Samuel and his men wouldn't run into any needless interruptions.

That's something that we modern people, who have been bound by the shackles of time since birth, can't get used to.

Samuel understood the idea of leading a healthy lifestyle, but having served as a soldier for years, he honestly didn't distinguish much between night and day. Except for the rich and powerful, who could afford a clockwork watch, the majority of people relied on the sun to tell time.

All of these factors made tonight the perfect chance. Their target was Count Winzer's estate, located within the citadel city of Galatia. They'd need to cross the walls to infiltrate the city. They'd chosen the least conspicuous route they could and memorized the route to Count Winzer's estate.

But even the most carefully prepared plan could encounter unexpected developments. Someone could get injured or become ill, which would require a late-night visit to a doctor. A drunkard could stumble out of an alleyway, or a burglar skulking in the streets could cross their path. Of course, Samuel didn't really think they'd run into such a situation. Honestly speaking, those scenarios were close to impossible.

Well, even if it does happen, we're all experienced enough to act without hesitation to silence witnesses.

Samuel smiled bitterly. That was an obvious conclusion, given his past. Anyone unfortunate enough to run into the Hunting Dogs would be disposed of at once—as happened to all who laid eyes upon that which they mustn't see. That was yet another truth that held true no matter what world you were in.

Samuel wasn't proud of it, but his hands were already stained with the blood of many. Whether he'd used a gun, a knife, or his own bare hands, he'd stood firm on the battlefield under the orders of his homeland. The lives he'd taken clung to him with the passage of time, clotting like blood and staining him

permanently.

After that, when Samuel was summoned to this world, he kept on fighting for the Organization, to defend the lives and honor of his comrades. That resolve led him to kill many foes, and not just armed opponents. He'd even mercilessly slain women and children. His top priority always was to fulfill his given missions. If it were necessary, he'd stoop to any means, no matter how dirty.

This time was no different. It wasn't clear yet if their mission would succeed or fail, but either way, corpses were bound to pile up. Another body or two wouldn't even be a drop in the bucket.

Still, Samuel truly hoped no such witnesses appeared. Though he was ruthless, he didn't have the kind of warped mentality that enjoyed the act of murder. He would kill mercilessly when necessary, but he wasn't twisted enough to want to commit senseless murder. Besides, acting needlessly could very well beckon further danger later down the line. Silencing someone was easy, but that could produce more eyewitnesses.

Someone could happen upon us silencing them. Sounds like something out of a suspense movie.

In fact, such a thing would be cliché in a movie.

No one would be walking around outside on a moonless night. The early bedtime is convenient for us; it keeps them out of our hair. The only other issue is time.

Samuel glared at Galatia. His plan this time was easy.

The Organization's prized executive unit, the Hunting Dogs, was made up of otherworlders on the same level as the highest-ranked adventurers. They'd all learned countless tactics and techniques from veteran soldiers and police officers. And that training had included infiltration and sabotage. They were to the Organization what the Green Berets were to the United States, or what the Special Forces Group was to Japan. From their perspective, attacking a regional governor and taking a specific object from him wasn't a simple task, but so long as they got the timing right, they could do it without fail.

However, the Hunting Dogs weren't all-powerful. Samuel feared one thing

above all: coincidences. Once could prepare for and deal with inevitabilities, but coincidences were unavoidable. As a mere man, the best he could do was prepare for all possible contingencies and try his hardest to succeed.

Either way, our top priority is recovering the firearm. We cannot fail.

Their mission was to recover a gun. They didn't know what sort of gun it was or how it found its way into this world, but they knew Count Winzer definitely had a firearm in his possession.

A revolver typically held five bullets. If it was an automatic, as long as it wasn't a modified model with a long magazine or something, it probably had a few dozen bullets. As an anti-personnel weapon, it was quite the menace. On the other hand, its threat was quite limited. Guns only became dangerous when they were loaded with ammunition. Certainly, they could still be used as blunt weapons even without bullets, but that wasn't where their worth lay.

That was why firearms became the principal weapon of modern warfare. They were stronger than swords and knives. However, that only applied if ammunition was plentiful and both cheap and easy to produce. No place here had reached a production rate that could handle the mass production of bullets.

The Organization knew this, but it frantically sent the Hunting Dogs to collect this single firearm anyway. That was because their objective was to manage this world's technological standards.

There are actual cases of this in the past. I can't blame the Organization for being nervous.

Samuel thought back to a world history lesson he'd had in high school. His school wasn't a high-ranking institution; it was subpar at best. It wasn't quite the lawless delinquent school one saw in movies, but he did have classmates who'd been suspended or expelled for possession of drugs or weapons. A few of them had even died before Samuel graduated.

This meant very few students listened in class. And since the students were so unmotivated, the teachers were likewise dispassionate about lectures. World history was the one class where that was different. The teacher kept using allegories to draw the students' interest. They were a bit of a quirky, idiosyncratic person who would tour Japan during their vacations and visit

ancient battlefields. They would often get derailed during lectures and tell the class stories about Japan's particularities.

One day, the teacher told them of how western European merchants had introduced the arquebus to Japan in the mid-sixteenth century. Their ship got caught in a storm, and they found themselves on the Japanese island Tanegashima in the Satsuma province. They sold two arquebuses to the lord of the island, Tokitaka Tanegashima, who had his blacksmiths work on copying them.

After that, the arquebus became a common weapon in Japan. The *Teppouki*, a history book detailing the genealogy of firearms in Japan, said that the Portuguese merchants brought the arquebus to Japan in 1543. After that, the arquebus became one of the primary weapons in the Japanese arsenal, alongside the katana and the bow and arrow.

There is a theory that merchants and Japanese pirates who sailed near Asia and went as far south as the Philippines brought firearms to Japan even sooner. Whether the theory is credible, the fact remains that replicas of the arquebus were produced in large numbers during the Warring States period in Japan. It was said that by the end of the period, there were several hundred thousand arquebuses in Japan.

If the Teppouki is to be trusted, within just fifty years a single arquebus became that many firearms. It's a good example of how there's no telling what might trigger a technological innovation.

Perhaps all of this was simply a miracle that took place by coincidence in the unique country that is Japan.

At the same time, Spain and Portugal were in their age of discovery and were exploring the world in pursuit of riches and glory. The treaties of Zaragoza and Tordesillas demonstrated how much power Spain and Portugal had. These self-righteous treaties drew a line across the world map, dividing it in two to decide which country got what land. They did all of this without any regard for the people living in these lands.

The white people of the time were impudent. The Church's teachings claimed that they were the chosen superior people blessed by the Lord. They built

massive galleons to cross the sea, determined to lift the veil of mystery hanging over the world.

Armed with the most advanced technology of the time, they intended to take the world by storm and conquer anything in their way. They had powerful ships, superior navigation skills, and weapons called arquebuses. Other countries didn't even know what that weapon was, much like how Japan hadn't.

Samuel didn't think any country in this world had the same conditions as Japan had at the time. Since the Onin War, Japan had been in the Warring States period, which had stimulated the production of weaponry. Those particular circumstances led them to replicate the arquebus and produce it in numbers that matched other countries. That could possibly happen here too.

Still, I doubt the people here can do the same things the Japanese of the Warring States period could. The weapons that came here were revolvers and automatic rifles, and their structure is much more complicated than the arquebus.

In all honesty, Samuel didn't know if it was possible for them to mass produce these firearms. Some people might call him racist for thinking so. And true, he did look down on the people of this world, calling them uncultured barbarians. But that wasn't to say he was underestimating their abilities. The battles he'd fought in Afghanistan had taught him all too well not to underestimate his enemies. The people here might be technologically inferior to those of Rearth, but in all fairness, it'd be wrong to assume it was completely impossible for them to replicate a firearm.

That said, if the Organization really doesn't underestimate this world's people, I wish it would let us use the firearms we do have.

Modern warfare was built around the use of firearms. It also included knives, bare-handed martial arts techniques, and a gun's bayonet, but firearms were the major players. On battlefields where the use of firearms was unrestricted, both allies and enemies were expected to carry guns. Melee combat was limited to cases where one couldn't use a firearm, like if they'd lost their gun or run out of bullets.

Right now, Samuel and his subordinates weren't equipped with any guns or

explosives like C4. All they had were knives and swords.

Swords and spears are obviously useful weapons, especially here where group combat using antiquated weapons is the norm. I can understand why they'd forbid us from using guns so as to stop that technology from leaking. And our plan would work out just fine even without any. We were trained in guerrilla tactics and other forms of unconventional warfare, so no natives here can match us. But...

The cultural level in this world was somewhere between the Middle Ages and early modern times. Samuel's analysis was equal parts an otherworlder's scorn and a soldier's coolheaded analysis.

Modern warfare wasn't like the wars in Japan's Warring States period, when they had to set up a position on the field and fight in formation. The creation of firearms changed the quality of warfare. Or rather, the advancement of firearms did.

The arquebus used in the Warring States period separated the gunpowder from the bullets, which meant that bows, swords, and spears still had a place on the battlefield. After all, flintlock weapons like the arquebus took time and effort to load. One had to use a rod called a pitcher stick to insert the gunpowder into the barrel and insert the bullet afterward. On top of that, the quality of both the metal and the gunpowder was poor, and the gun's effective range was relatively limited. Regardless, they had a larger range than bows, and the thundering blast of the gunpowder's explosion rattled and demoralized the enemy. As a result, the arquebus soon became quite ubiquitous.

One major factor behind that was that guns were far easier to use than swords or spears.

At the time, warriors and knights were career soldiers, but most of the army was made up of conscripts.

Most of those conscripts worked in professions unrelated to military affairs. Teaching them how to wield a sword or nock a bow was difficult. Handling guns, however, was much simpler in comparison. All one had to do was load a bullet and then pull the trigger.

Of course, anyone could aim and shoot, but landing a hit was an entirely

different matter. Accurately shooting at a target wasn't as simple as it might seem. Nonetheless, the ease of pulling a trigger somehow lightened the burden of guilt for killing the enemy, and training soldiers to use guns was easier than teaching them to use bows and swords.

But the biggest benefit was that guns could be used by anyone, without regard to gender or physique. Using a sword or a bow required muscle strength, so people with larger physiques had an advantage. Men like Samuel were preferred over women. This wasn't so much a matter of discrimination, but a matter of the fundamental physical difference between men and women. However, none of that was an issue with guns. So long as one could aim and fire, that was all that was necessary. A child would struggle to kill a man with a sword or a bow, but even an infant could kill an adult using a firearm.

Despite the gun's uniqueness among weapons, world history reveals that since the invention of the firearm, countries around the world have treated it much the same as a bow or a sword. This was because muzzleloaders of the time were built in such a way that after shooting the first shot, one had to clean the barrel and then load it with more gunpowder and bullets to shoot again. Not to mention, guns were expensive, and gunpowder and bullets likewise took time and funds to produce.

In the United States of today, one can buy a mass-produced bullet for as little as a dollar. But before the Industrial Revolution, each bullet had to be made by hand in a workshop. Guns couldn't have been a primary weapon like they are today.

Plus, their strategy was to close the distance using ranged weapons like bows and guns, and then decide the battle through melee attacks.

Such was the background behind the invention of the bayonet. But all that changed when one genius entered the scene. In the mid-nineteenth century, Alfred Bernhard Nobel invented an ignitable detonator called dynamite. This led to the invention of the cartridge, a form of ammunition that unified the projectile and the gunpowder. This made it so one could shoot and load with ease. After going through so many developments and modifications, guns had an overwhelming advantage over swords and bows.

That teacher sure loved talking about the War of Independence, the Wild West, and Japan's Warring States period.

At the time, that teacher's lessons had felt boring, but now Samuel wished he'd listened more seriously.

It's ironic. Only after being summoned here did I see how blessed I was back then. Having the leisure to study...

The things he'd learned then had helped him survive after he was summoned. The basic knowledge he'd gained in primary and middle school was especially practical.

The sensation of someone approaching from behind pulled Samuel out of his pondering.

"Is the check finished?" Samuel asked the figure without turning around to look at them. It was one of his comrades from the dark days he'd spent in Afghanistan. Samuel would recognize his presence with ease.

"Yes, Captain Kinkaid. There are no issues standing in our way! We can set out whenever you give the word."

Samuel nodded. "Understood. But we can't move quite yet."

The man behind him wavered somewhat. "We still haven't gotten the signal?" he asked.

"No, not yet," Samuel answered, glaring in Galatia's direction.

It's the perfect chance, but the question is when will we get the signal to move in.

Samuel had received orders to attack Count Winzer's estate several days ago. He and his unit had been in the middle of mercenary work in the southern kingdoms, so they were picked for the task because they were close to the city. A few days later, they regrouped with the Organization's reinforcements and drafted the attack plan for tonight.

We got all our equipment, and we're lucky enough to have such a dark night. And just as we brace ourselves for the go-ahead, we get an order to remain on standby.

It was, in a word, tantalizing.

But if, like she said, this order came from him, there really isn't much we can do.

The image of a blue-eyed woman with long silver hair flashed in Samuel's mind. She was a very beautiful woman, but not one Samuel wanted to get involved with. He was a true and pure warrior who always fought on the front lines. He took pride in himself and his ability to survive war. That woman was the exact opposite of him. Her role was to remain shrouded in darkness, constantly intimidating and extorting people. That was her job as an intelligence officer, but just the same, Samuel wanted as little to do with her as possible.



Unfortunately for him, he had no choice. She was his superior in the Organization. And Samuel wasn't a low-ranking member either. As a senior officer of the Hunting Dogs, he had the highest authority as commander on the field. He was in charge of both his personal unit and a reserve force of roughly one hundred men. She was two ranks above Samuel. If Samuel were a colonel, she would be a major general. She was, in fact, the supreme commander of the Hunting Dogs. But she always hung back, manipulating people from the shadows, and he couldn't bring himself to like her.

This time, however, instead of hanging back like she always did, she'd stepped into this operation personally. That fact alone had alerted Samuel that something was different about this situation.

Yeah, something is off about this.

She had infiltrated Galatia all on her own. So long as she got inside the walls safely, she could decide which way this operation would go.

All of this is assuming that person really did return, though.

A year or so ago, a rumor had spread among the Organization, a rumor about a certain man. Samuel himself doubted its validity, given how absurd it was.

The return of a hero...

Samuel had never heard of the man in that rumor. He had disappeared to the interstice of space-time fifty years ago. But his accomplishments hadn't faded in the time that had passed. If anything, they'd become more vibrant. He was, after all, a key player in the Organization's founding.

But either way, this meant that Samuel's hands were tied.

Do we get the go-ahead, or are they going to tell us it's canceled? I can only hope we won't have any more irregularities in this operation.

Samuel silently prayed, looking up at the dark sky covered in a curtain of heavy clouds that hid the moon and the stars.

Chapter 1: Count Winzer's Estate

Around the same time the raiding party on the hill was eagerly awaiting the signal to go ahead, a figure was approaching an alleyway inn located a short distance away from Galatia's center. They moved confidently, though they were walking through the darkness without any light source. Galatia wasn't the pitch-black wilderness, and it was a fairly large city for this world, so light spilled from the residences' windows. But that little bit of illumination wasn't enough to tread through the darkness safely, and going out at night like this was borderline suicidal. However, based on the robe the figure wore, they obviously didn't want to be seen.

The figure probably wasn't a traveler seeking lodging. No travelers arrived at this time of night, anyway. Galatia's gates were locked after sunset, so unless one was a runner with special permission from someone in power, the doors remained closed until dawn. But this figure had ignored those rules and crossed the walls effortlessly earlier.

This is the place...

The figure's eyes settled on a certain inn. The sign hanging over the entrance displayed the inn's name as well as a symbol that marked it as an Organization-run business. Since the figure could make it out in complete darkness, they were obviously reinforcing their eyesight with martial thaumaturgy. Looking around to confirm that no one was watching, the figure silently slipped into the inn.

The inn's owner leaned their elbow on the reception counter and directed a suspicious glance at the sudden guest. "Who're you, coming in at this hour?" he asked moodily, seemingly displeased at the interruption. "Sorry, buddy, but we don't have any free rooms at the moment."

The innkeeper's name was Adolf Beckenbauer. On the surface, he was nothing more than a man hired as proprietor of a desolate inn located in Galatia's back alleys; no one would have assumed he owned the place based on

his appearance. He stood 180 centimeters tall and weighed 150 kilograms. His body was as thick as a barrel, and his forearm sported a flame-like tattoo.

The modern Japanese person would never look at him and assume he worked in customer service. If anything, he looked like a mobster or a gangster. In this world, though, his appearance wasn't that striking. He would look out of place in a modest village or an affluent neighborhood in the capital, but in areas populated by commoners and the lower classes, he'd blend in just fine. Besides, some mercenaries and adventurers looked much more menacing than Adolf did. And since he had to deal with those kinds of individuals at work, his stern expression and muscly arms came in handy. Most people would cower if someone that large were to glare at them, and indeed, his physique made it clear he wasn't to be trifled with.

"How about you take off that hood first?" Adolf asked the figure in a tone that wasn't quite intimidating, but it certainly left no room for argument. That alone proved he was no ordinary man. Then again, any person who would come here in the middle of the night wouldn't flinch just from that.

The figure remained silent as they casually removed their hood. Locks of silver hair spilled out, glinting in the lamp light like snow crystals. The figure was 175 centimeters tall and looked to be in their late twenties to early thirties. Their limbs were slender yet muscular, but what drew the eye the most was their plump breasts. She was a beautiful, voluptuous woman for sure.

Adolf swallowed nervously, perhaps out of lust, but after he looked at her face again, he reverted to his earlier annoyed state. "Huh, who are you? Did one of our customers call for you?" he asked again, not bothering to hide his displeasure.

It might have seemed that Adolf had assumed that she was a prostitute based on her alluring appearance, but in truth, he didn't really think that was possible. He noticed the sharp presence hidden behind her beauty. It was the same kind of sensation he got from the glint of a katana's blade or a gun's barrel.

And the way she stands and carries herself...

She was hiding it, but she moved like someone who fought for a living. And since she'd come to this inn at this time of night, when the gates were closed,

she had to be related to the Organization. In addition, the guest staying there had informed Adolf that they'd be expecting company.

Everything considered, Adolf didn't need to be so wary of this woman. But given the status of the person currently staying there, he couldn't afford to make even the slightest mistake. If anything unexpected were to happen, Adolf would, without a doubt, be executed for his blunder.

Despite the provocative implications, the woman didn't react to Adolf's question.

She doesn't look like the type to let her emotions show, anyway.

An easy way of exposing a person's true intentions and nature was to provoke and anger them, but it was also a very dangerous method. Normally Adolf would have handled this a bit more tactfully; even if he was the owner of a rundown inn, he was still a merchant. Before he was summoned to this world, he had been a weapons smuggler in Germany's black market, and in the ten or so years he'd been here, he'd labored across the continent for the Organization. Now he spent his days in this inn, so he had to be adept at handling customers.

The Organization hated nothing more than causing needless trouble, but that didn't stem from the kindness of their hearts. They simply didn't want to draw attention to themselves. If this Earth's people were to learn of the Organization's existence, not even their higher prana absorption rate as otherworlders would be enough to save them. They just didn't have the numbers to defend themselves without taking heavy losses. Of course, the Organization wouldn't lose in a direct clash. They'd defend their rights even if it meant covering the land with the corpses of this world's people, and they had the power and means to do it. But that wasn't what the Organization wanted to be, so they took care not to draw attention to themselves.

Everything had its exceptions, however. For example, tonight...

Either way, the one thing I have to avoid is causing trouble for those two, Adolf thought.

There were two people currently staying in the basement suite, which only the highest-ranking members of the Organization were allowed to use. One of them was Zheng Motoku, an aide to one of the Organization's elders, Liu Daijin.

Zheng was promised one of the highest positions in the Organization. In fact, rumor had it that Liu Daijin had only been a nominal leader over the last few years, and Zheng had been helming his faction more than the elder did. In other words, Zheng was an elder in an unofficial capacity—an apprentice elder, as it were.

That information alone overwhelmed Adolf. Even more unbelievable was that this high-ranking Organization member was acting as a servant to another man. Adolf was a skilled warrior, but he wasn't a leader in the Organization, so he didn't know who this second man was. Nonetheless, he'd heard a rumor going around, and the fact that Zheng Motoku was serving him implied that it was true.

Because of the guests' status, if this woman was a spy from some other opposing faction, Adolf was resolved to silence her if need be. He didn't really want to do that, though, so he asked her to reveal her background.

The woman ignored Adolf's determined question and approached the reception counter. She calmly and wordlessly rang the bell sitting on it, but not like a normal customer would. The first two taps were normal, the next three were lighter, and the final tap was firm.

The bell echoed through the room in a specific rhythm. Normally, this would have seemed like she was picking a fight. The bell was for customers to beckon employees to the reception counter in case it was empty, but Adolf was standing right there. He'd even spoken directly to her, though his attitude had been coercive and intimidating.

Frankly, Adolf had acted terribly. Implying a woman was a prostitute, even if it was the middle of the night, was an awful thing to say. Most women in modern society would have been offended and taken the matter to court. This world was different, but it still wasn't a proper way to speak to a potential customer.

All the same, that didn't justify the woman's reaction. Ringing the bell right in front of the innkeeper looked like intentional harassment, and Adolf wasn't the type to take this kind of provocation quietly. He wouldn't go so far as killing her, but he could very well punch her for it. Considering how much larger he was than she, it did seem like the woman had made a very dangerous gamble.

Yet, for some reason, Adolf didn't lunge at her. Actually, his expression completely changed from languid displeasure to a strained frown—the face of a warrior. He swiftly got to his feet and bowed respectfully to the woman.

"I only did it to confirm that you are one of ours, but I sincerely apologize for the disrespect I showed you," Adolf said, his voice full of the deepest reverence. "Please, come this way. He's waiting for you."

If Adolf's beard had been a bit more kempt, he could have passed for some noble house's butler.

The woman nodded calmly at Adolf, but on the inside, her emotions were a stormy sea—though it wasn't clear whether it was because of Adolf or because of the man who beckoned her.

"Very well. Then the rumor is true?" she asked.

"Yes," Adolf replied. "I don't know the exact details, but it seems so."

Adolf then showed the woman to a door behind the counter and opened it to reveal a staircase leading down to the basement level.

"The stairs are a bit steep. Do be careful," Adolf cautioned. He lit a nearby candlestick and handed it to the woman, signaling that she was to go down alone.

"Right. Thank you."

The woman accepted the candlestick and walked down the stairs. The soft candlelight made her shadow dance across the walls.

Thinking of the man waiting at the bottom of the stairs, the woman sighed. Her name was Veronica Kozlova. She once worked in the Soviet Union's famous intelligence bureau, the KGB—specifically in the PGU, the foreign operations division and the predecessor to what is now known as the SVR—where she was in charge of intelligence activities. Her department also handled illegal matters, like assassination and sabotage. That was a thing of the past, though. At present, Veronica was the commander of the Organization's eastern front military department. Compared to Rhoadseria's military officers, she ranked above the captains of the knight orders but beneath Helena Steiner, the general.

As a woman of such a high station, Veronica had no reason to come to Galatia on her own. She was only here because one of the elders had ordered her to meet a man staying in this city.

What will come of this, I wonder? Veronica thought.

She already had a general idea of what the man was going to tell her. The problem was that those words would trouble her. Of course, there wasn't much to brood over because Veronica simply needed to choose one of two options—either accept this man's request or reject it.

The answer's already out. Personally, I'd love to accept his request, but it's just too risky.

Regardless of whether the risks threatened the entirety of the Organization or just Samuel and his executive unit, the outcome would be unpleasant. Veronica's job was to draft plans from the safety of her office, but she knew the difficulties that those on the field faced. Sometimes she had to order her subordinates to go to their deaths if it meant accomplishing their mission. Even during her time in the KGB, Veronica had received cases where she had to send her operatives to die, but those situations had been the rarest of emergencies. Controlling events so that those situations didn't happen was her job, and she'd clashed with her superiors many times in the past to make sure those situations didn't occur.

The problem was that there were some people she couldn't argue against. Veronica wasn't the strongest person in the Organization quite yet. Many around her expected her to reach that station one day, and she herself wished for that, but if it were to happen, it would be at least a decade down the line. At present, she was an elite charged with the Organization's next generation, and she had the authority that came with such a position. Nevertheless, if an elder were to make a demand of her, Veronica would be obligated to act upon it.

Requests can be especially sticky.

If this were an order, Veronica wouldn't be conflicted. The Organization wasn't a country, but it was stronger than any one nation, and the Hunting Dogs were as disciplined as an army. No matter how dangerous or unreasonable the Organization's orders might be, they didn't have the right to refuse. They had to

give it their best efforts to see the mission through. If Samuel and his men were to end up dead as a result of those orders, it wouldn't be solely Veronica's responsibility. She'd be partially accountable for it, but the elder who'd given her such an unreasonable order would take most of the blame.

A request, however, was much different. If this were to fail, Veronica would be the only one held accountable for accepting the man's request. It was an unreasonable conclusion, but such were the facts.

The only thing that the Organization's elder had asked Veronica to do was to meet this man in Galatia and speak with him. Whether she did as the man asked was entirely up to her. No matter what he requested of her, she had the right to say no. Be that as it may, the truth of the matter was that she didn't really have the freedom to exercise that right. Refusing would drag the name of the elder who'd mediated their meeting through the mud. Besides, given the identity of the man she was about to meet, a request from him wasn't much different than a direct order from an elder. It was possibly even more binding than that. At the same time, she was the Organization's commander of the eastern front, so she couldn't prioritize her own self-preservation over the entirety of the Organization.

Koichiro Mikoshiba. A hero who supposedly died fifty years ago. Another sigh escaped Veronica's lips. *If we had more time, we could've come to a compromise much easier, but trying to do that now is too difficult.*

After much deliberation, Veronica had come to this conclusion on the way here. Still, she didn't assume that just because she said it was impossible it would be the end of the conversation.

So it's past here.

Veronica reached the bottom of the staircase and stood before a door adorned with lavish carvings. She raised her hand and knocked, feeling like a student who'd been called to the teacher's lounge for forgetting her homework. Fortunately, fate extended a helping hand when the door opened from the inside, revealing a man.

"It's been a long time, Nika."

Veronica couldn't mask her surprise. Russians used nicknames when they

were close to someone emotionally, and only one man in this world would call her by the nickname “Nika.”

“Zheng! It’s you!” Veronica exclaimed.



Zheng nodded with his usual serene smile and bowed. “My apologies, Nika, for calling on your authority as commander of the eastern front to hold the Hunting Dogs’ mission.”

It was a true apology from the bottom of his heart, but Veronica ignored it and instead pelted him with one question after another.

“Why are you here? Weren’t you supposed to be serving under Liu Daijin?”

Veronica had heard that a high-ranking member of the Organization was currently working with Koichiro Mikoshiba, but she’d never imagined it would be her dear friend Zheng Motoku. This was perhaps another downside to the size and scale of the Organization, especially considering how limited their methods of transmitting information were.

Zheng shook his head. “You’ll have to forgive me, but we don’t have much time. I need you to see Sir Koichiro first.” He ushered Veronica inside. “How much have you heard so far?”

“I don’t know the details,” Veronica answered, frowning, “just the general outline of the situation.”

“I see. And? What do you intend to do?”

There was no need for him to elaborate because there was only one answer Veronica could reasonably give.

“I do feel sorry. And you being here confirms that rumor. I’ve heard of Koichiro Mikoshiba, and I understand that if it’s for him, we should be willing to make some compromises, but...”

Veronica couldn’t change this. Being a commander, she had the responsibility and duty to send soldiers into battle. Even so, this choice was dangerous for Veronica, as it could very well affect her future.

Zheng didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow, though. “I suppose I can’t blame you...”

Taken aback, Veronica glared at Zheng. She felt like he was mocking her resolve. Yet it was because she was speaking to Zheng, of all people, that all she did was glare. Had it been anyone else, she’d have snapped their neck.

Zheng didn't seem the slightest bit flustered by this. "I'm sure you were quite anxious, but don't worry. This was on very short notice, and you weren't given any details. It makes sense you'd feel this way, Nika."

"What do you mean?" Veronica asked, looking perplexed.

Zheng didn't answer. Instead, he took another few steps and stopped in front of a door.

"I think it would be best if you hear the answer to that directly from him," Zheng said and opened the door.



Three shadows sprinted through the night, approaching Count Winzer's estate in Galatia. They moved like gusts of wind, clad in black masks and leather armor—the Hunting Dogs' standard issue gear for raids.

Zheng Motoku led them, while Veronica Kozlova and Koichiro Mikoshiba followed close behind. Running as the vanguard was a dangerous position, so Veronica normally assumed that role. But compared to Zheng, Liu Daijin's servant, and Koichiro, Liu's best friend and a hero of the Organization, Veronica was the lowest-ranking person in the group.

Still, Veronica was the most familiar with Galatia and its layout. There was a reason she'd been able to come here on such short notice and found her way to the inn so easily. As such, she had a valuable role to play, so either Koichiro or Zheng would have to be the vanguard. Koichiro was Liu's dear friend, so Zheng couldn't consent to putting Koichiro in such a dangerous position. Koichiro had elected not to argue with Zheng since they were so pressed for time.

So this is Koichiro Mikoshiba's power, Veronica thought to herself. *I knew he was a legendary hero, but he's already an elderly man. Despite that, from the way he runs, you wouldn't think he'd aged a day.*

Koichiro ran with light steps, his katana Kikka strapped to his back. Zheng carried a spear over three meters long called the Six-Harmony Spear, a weapon favored by practitioners of Bajiquan. Between the two of them, Koichiro was better off. He was only carrying a katana—albeit one longer than the standard length—and it wasn't much of a burden. But that was only taking into account

the weapon's weight. The three of them were about to set out on a night raid, so they were also appropriately equipped for such a mission.

The plate armor knights in this world donned weighed forty kilograms, but their leather armor weighed a mere tenth of that, so it was comparatively light. It was also very flexible. But armor was still armor, and leather armor still greatly affected one's mobility. Even though the joints had been specially made to allow for an exceptionally large range of movement, it was much more restricting compared to sweatshirts. In addition, the three of them also wore chain mesh under their armor.

On the whole, it was similar to the body armor modern soldiers wore. The chain mesh wasn't made of iron, so it was relatively light, but it did weigh around three kilos. They also had first-aid kits in case someone got injured and knives to serve as sub-weapons. All together, their gear weighed ten kilograms more than usual. That wasn't necessarily a major weight, but breezing through the city at high speeds without so much as getting winded was impressive.

I can see why Sir Koichiro suggested this.

Veronica thought back to the conversation they'd had just an hour ago. Koichiro had first apologized for both putting the mission on hold and calling her, the Hunting Dogs' commander, to Galatia. After that, he'd offered a suggestion—he himself would charge into Count Winzer's estate and retrieve the firearm.

Veronica had initially doubted his sanity. There weren't many guards protecting Count Winzer's estate, but the reason they'd called the Hunting Dogs in the first place was because they'd received word that at least some of those guards were particularly skilled. On top of that, Cardinal Roland of the Church of Meneos had been called to visit the estate that night. This meant that Rodney Mackenna and Menea Norberg were bound to be there too, and they were rumored to be among the Temple Knights' strongest warriors. There were other Temple Knights in Galatia as well, and if they were to catch wind of a disturbance at Count Winzer's estate, they'd all hurry over.

The Hunting Dogs were the Organization's prized force, a skilled assassination group with the strength to eliminate threats. They also carried equipment that

had been improved in ways the people of this world could never conceive. If winning a battle was all that they were after, that wouldn't be too difficult. Though conversely, they wouldn't get out unscathed.

In an effort to resolve all of those issues, Koichiro had proposed they infiltrate in small numbers. The fewer infiltrators there were, the less likely it was that the enemy would detect them. It was even possible that they could get the firearm out of the estate unnoticed. However, since they didn't know exactly where the weapon was stored, or if there was indeed just one firearm and not multiple guns, infiltrating the estate was extremely risky.

This was why Veronica had more than a hundred operatives on this mission, but seeing the progress just the three of them made erased her apprehension. In fact, she felt like she'd insulted Koichiro's prowess by doubting him.

Zheng was once a commanding officer in the Hunting Dogs, but Sir Koichiro exceeds even him.

Veronica's role was commanding the unit from afar, but she was also familiar with field work. As a matter of principle, a member's combat abilities usually equaled their standing in the Organization, so high-ranking members tended to be incredibly skilled. One had to be stronger than most people to save the lives of others, after all.

This tradition had been passed down for centuries, starting with the otherworlders of ages past who sowed the seeds of what would become the Organization. Because of this, Veronica kept her skills polished. She wasn't equal to Samuel and his men in this field, of course—they'd seen more battlefields than she ever would—but it was experience, not physical strength, that decided which way a battle would swing. Veronica was confident that in terms of basic capabilities, she could match Samuel.

From Veronica's perspective, Koichiro's abilities were extraordinary. She wasn't sure if it was a matter of superior athletic ability or mastery of martial thaumaturgy, but Koichiro was far more skilled than Zheng or her.

He could probably run at twice this speed and still not break a sweat.

Considering the way Koichiro kept glancing in her direction every now and then, he was probably concerned about her condition and suppressing the urge

to sprint even faster to Count Winzer's estate. The only reason he hadn't come alone was because Zheng and Veronica had stopped him and he'd agreed out of consideration for them.

I didn't think I'd end up being the one holding them back.

Veronica bit her lips so hard that the rusty taste of blood filled her mouth. She could always increase the rate with which she reinforced her body, but that would consume an immense amount of prana before she even made it to the estate, which would make it harder to sneak in once they got there.

When Koichiro suggested the infiltration, Veronica hadn't wanted to let such a celebrated hero of the Organization go alone. That wasn't entirely out of concern for him, though. Even if Koichiro was a celebrated hero, if she let him march into enemy territory all on his own, it would make her look irresponsible. She didn't know if she'd be publicly criticized for it, but her standing would certainly take a blow.

Moreover, Zheng was a close friend of hers, close enough to call her by her nickname, and he wasn't going to let Koichiro go alone either. They hadn't been in touch for quite some time, but that was only because both of them had recently been promoted to roles with a large number of responsibilities and duties. But that one night's dream they'd shared together during the Organization's general meeting a few years ago was one memory Veronica would never forget. She couldn't just watch as Zheng followed Koichiro into this.

In the end, Veronica's reasons for accompanying Koichiro were half self-preservation and half devotion to Zheng. There was another factor, though; Veronica simply wasn't cruel enough to let Koichiro Mikoshiba march to his death. She'd had nothing to do with this man so far, but although he was a hero said to have died fifty years ago, he was still a member of the same Organization as her. And Veronica would never abandon a comrade, a conviction she'd held since her time in the SVR.

But even good intentions could end up backfiring, and Veronica was seeing it happen right now.

Maybe I can still pull out...

Veronica hated nothing more than incompetence. It compromised missions and exposed her subordinates to danger. Yet the most incompetent member of this group was Veronica herself.

Veronica had only joined this mission because she'd misjudged Koichiro's power. Now that she realized how capable he was, the only thing she could do now was leave and pray for Koichiro and Zheng's success—as pathetic as that might be. Despite her personal feelings, Veronica cared more for the mission than her own pride and dignity.

I'm such a laughingstock.

Koichiro, however, saw things differently. "There's no need to worry about this, Miss Veronica," he said serenely as he ran opposite of her.

Being able to speak without shouting while the wind roared in one's ears was quite difficult, but for some reason, those words rang clear as a bell in Veronica's ears. She didn't have the presence of mind to wonder about it, though.

She turned her face to Koichiro and shouted, "Still!"

"Yes, in terms of ability, your feelings are correct. But people all have things they're adept at and things they're less proficient in. Besides, you are quite skilled already. Zheng told me that you're one of the future elder candidates. I have such an important figure playing along with my whims. I can only be grateful, and I would not dare insult you."

Veronica could easily tell he was being honest.

"That aside, charging into enemy territory alone would have left me quite anxious, so I'm ever so thankful for the fact you two offered to join me."

Veronica couldn't help but smile, and she could almost see Koichiro's strained smile under his mask. She could tell he was concerned for the two of them.

Suddenly, Zheng turned around and shouted, "Sir Koichiro, Nika, we're almost at the estate!"

The three of them steadily slowed down. Before long, an estate at the end of the main street came into view, surrounded by walls three times a man's

height. Once they got there, they hid in the shadows of an alleyway opposite the estate.

“The guards are making routine patrols, but surveillance is lighter than I thought,” Zheng muttered.

“They’re probably more focused on guarding the city walls,” Veronica replied.

Galatia was surrounded by a wall, so Count Winzer and his people felt relatively safe within the city’s confines. In an attempt to use their limited military force to its utmost efficiency, they’d told the guards to focus on potential attacks from outside the walls. So even though important guests from the Church of Meneos were visiting that night, the estate’s security wasn’t as tight. Of course, given how easily Veronica got inside Galatia, their security at the city walls seemed like a joke in hindsight, but that went without saying.

Either way, the fact that Count Winzer’s estate was less secure was good news for the three of them. The estate’s walls were high, but with their skills, they could effortlessly scale them. After that, they’d just need to proceed according to plan.

“Let’s get down to business, then,” Koichiro said, prompting a silent nod from Zheng and Veronica.



Rodney Mackenna was spending the night in Count Winzer’s estate, laying in bed and agonizing. They hadn’t originally planned to stay here, but after Count Winzer met Cardinal Roland, he insisted that the cardinal spend the night. And so Rodney found himself in this room.

I guess letting a cardinal go back like that would be a blow to his dignity and reputation.

Rhoadseria was in the eastern region of the continent, so it was far from the holy city. In general, the Church of Meneos didn’t have much influence in this kingdom, but that didn’t mean the Rhoadserian nobles could be bad hosts to a high-ranking church member from afar. But as a result, Cardinal Roland’s bodyguards, Rodney and Menea, had to spend the night at the Winzer estate too.

This wasn't something they'd planned for, nor were they prepared for this level of hospitality. The bed Rodney was lying on softly enveloped his body. The lace curtains were first-rate textiles, weaved by master seamstresses over many months, and the table and the bookshelves lining the walls were finely crafted from quality wood. A bottle of wine distilled for nearly a decade sat on the desk, in case he wanted a drink before bed. Even a single glass of that wine was worth more than Rodney's entire monthly salary.

Count Winzer was a very generous host, to be sure, but the more Rodney tasted of this hospitality, the more his heart grew cold. To him, it felt like a gaudy display of wealth and status. It made him uncomfortable, like a bitter reminder that he too was a member of this arrogant class of nobles.

Nonetheless, Rodney wasn't so immature as to say that to Count Winzer's face. Had it been a few years ago, he might have done so without thinking of the consequences, but now he was one of the Temple Knights and a guard to Cardinal Roland. His every action was being scrutinized, so he had to be careful of what he said and did. Unfortunately, it didn't make him feel any less restless here.

Cardinal Roland's room is much more extravagant than mine, of course.

Rodney didn't expect their host to treat a knight as well as a cardinal, so it made sense that Cardinal Roland's room would be much fancier than his. Perhaps the cardinal even had a woman or two serving him.

I'd heard that Rhoadseria's been in shambles the last few years, torn apart by internal strife, but given how well they're treating a bodyguard like me, it looks like they're still doing relatively fine. Or at least that's how they're trying to present themselves.

Both possibilities seemed valid. Nobles lived to project vanity and ostentation, and any noble that didn't do so probably wasn't worth much. But Rodney knew nobility well enough, and he was aware that despite how pretentious they were, they weren't ones to waste money needlessly. Rodney had the feeling that Count Winzer was doing this because he had some other reason.

Well, Tachibana's with Asuka, so she'll probably be fine without us for one night.

Asuka Kiryuu had been a complete stranger to him, but when Rodney found her unconscious in the woods that day, they had formed a connection. At first, the only thing that had spurred him to save her was his sense of knightly duty, but then he'd learned where the katana she carried came from, which made her a useful pawn. Be that as it may, what started as duty and self-interest had changed with time, and by now, Rodney genuinely cared for her. Menea had once offhandedly suggested that he should consider taking her as his bride, but Rodney saw her less as a potential wife and more as a younger sister.

I'm sure this kind of relationship isn't going to last forever, though.

Rodney truly wished they could stay the way they were now, but realistically speaking, it was doubtful that could happen.

Based on the circumstances, Rodney had inferred that Asuka's grandfather, Koichiro Mikoshiba, had once been summoned to this world but had somehow returned to Rearth. Nothing else could explain the existence of Ouka, the katana Asuka carried. Furthermore, returning to Rearth was supposed to be impossible, so Koichiro couldn't have done it on his own. He had to have had help, and the most likely suspects were members of the Organization, a group that moved in secret and manipulated events across the continent from the shadows.

Is Koichiro Mikoshiba one of them, or did he make it back by way of coincidence?

Whichever it was, Rodney needed to look into this man, even if it meant resorting to torture.

The other concern is that there's another man with the surname Mikoshiba on this continent.

Based on what Asuka had told him, that man was Koichiro's grandson. The most puzzling part, however, was that a man with the same last name as Koichiro had been summoned at roughly the same time. The Church of Meneos had sent their delegation from the continent's southwest all the way to Rhoadseria just to investigate this other man.

This can't be a coincidence. And they must be behind it all.

Rodney believed that once he found the reason behind all this, he'd discover why he and Menea had to leave their homeland in the Kingdom of Tarja.

The Organization... What are they trying to do?

A large yawn crept from Rodney's lips. It was late, past two o'clock, and all the time he'd spent restlessly pondering these things had finally made him sleepy. His heavy eyelids began dropping.

The next moment, Rodney hopped out of his bed in alarm.

What was that feeling just now?

Rodney hadn't sensed anything concrete, and if he were asked to explain his reaction, he'd be hard-pressed to give an answer. The only description he could give was that it had been a primal, animalistic instinct.

Whatever it was, it had made Rodney's consciousness jolt from almost asleep to fully awake. His mind was racing, so going back to bed wasn't an option. His warrior instincts had raised an alarm, forbidding him from sleeping.

No point in putting on my armor. I'll have to go out like this.

In all honesty, Rodney would have preferred to put on his armor. If he were to run into an attacker, he'd have to fight them, and any opponent here who chose to come at this late hour would certainly come prepared. But at times like these, Rodney preferred acting immediately. He put on his clothes, which were by his bed, and bolted out into the corridor. With his sword in hand, he knocked on the adjacent room's door.

"Menea, get up! We have to get to Cardinal Roland's room!"

Hearing the person behind the door stirring, Rodney ran to Cardinal Roland's room.

Goddammit, I was careless!

The most suspicious person in this situation was certainly Count Winzer. After all, they were in his estate deep inside Galatia's walls; intruders wouldn't be able to get in easily.

I have to make it in time!

Rodney had an unfavorable impression of the Church of Meneos as a group, and he harbored quite a few suspicions about the church. It wasn't that he denied the God of Light, Meneos, or his doctrine of justice and mercy, nor did he deny the salvation the church offered to many people, but anyone who knew Rodney would understand his doubts. In truth, there was little difference between the greedy nobility and the church's clergy. Many of the clergy extorted money from the adherents, calling it "donations" or "alms," and when they laid eyes on a beautiful woman or boy, they would pull them into their bedchambers.

It was said that bad money drives out good. That was true in any world, but it didn't mean there weren't any honorable people in the church. Rodney knew several such clergymen personally. In fact, if he hadn't met them, he would've long since fled the church, even if it had sheltered him after he was chased out of his home. And one of those honorable clergymen was Cardinal Roland.

In the space of ten seconds, Rodney reinforced his body with martial thaumaturgy, sprinted down the corridor with the speed of the wind, and approached Cardinal Roland's room. Normally, regardless of whether it was an emergency, Rodney would have knocked on the door to check what was going on inside. This time, though, Rodney didn't slow and instead barreled toward the oak door and bashed it open.

The sight that greeted him was very different from what he'd expected.

"What is this? Coming in at this late hour..."

Cardinal Roland, seated on a chair, gazed at Rodney with an expression of surprise and exasperation. Next to him sat Count Winzer, who was looking at Rodney just as incredulously.

This can't be... Just what's going on here?!

Based on the scene he'd just barged into, the cardinal and the count were having a secret meeting that neither Menea nor he had been informed about. On the table between the cardinal and the count was a long, undecorated wooden box. The question of what they could be talking about at the dead of night did tickle Rodney's curiosity, but this couldn't have been what triggered his sudden unease. His relief at this, however, proved to be misplaced.

Someone slipped in through the door Rodney had bashed open. They didn't run inside, but rather walked in slowly and smoothly. They were clad in black from top to bottom, and even their face was covered in a black mask. They looked like pitch-black darkness personified.

The only thing Rodney could discern was that the intruder was of medium build. They were, for all intents and purposes, the most suspicious-looking figure one could meet. But though Rodney was well aware of how menacing they looked, he couldn't stop the shadowy figure from progressing; their movements were too natural to raise alarm.

I can't feel any enmity or bloodlust from them. Who in the blasted hell is this?

Rodney was a soldier and warrior who'd seen countless battles. He'd been attacked in the streets plenty of times, and he'd fought numerous opponents and even professional assassins, but all of those enemies had given off some semblance of bloodlust or animosity.

An enemy's aura depended on their skill. Some auras were stronger than others, but they all fluctuated across a spectrum of variations. Nevertheless, Rodney had never before run into someone like this—an opponent he felt absolutely nothing from—and that had delayed Rodney's reaction. He could only stand by and watch.

Unfortunately, that turned out to be the worst course of action. The figure briskly stepped up to Count Winzer, and as they passed by the count, a white flash streaked through the air before Rodney's very eyes.

Everyone in the room froze as they watched the shadow's smoothly executed movements. No one could move an inch.

Then Count Winzer's body began tilting, and within seconds, his upper half slid off and hit the floor. Blood spilled into the room, spreading across the carpet like a blooming flower.

The familiar stench of death filled Rodney's nostrils.

He slashed him as he drew his blade... Battojutsu!

Rodney immediately recognized the flash he'd seen, a quick-draw sword technique. Some of the Temple Knights had begun practicing the martial arts

brought from Rearth, but never before had Rodney seen anyone slash and sever a body like that within such a short amount of time.

Such skill... And they did it so casually.

Rodney felt terrified of the shadow, though that fear didn't stem from the technique the shadow had just used. It was frightening, to be sure—enough to strike dread into Rodney's heart, and he was one of the Temple Knights' most skilled members—but something else had caused Rodney's reaction. The shadow's presence, their aura, didn't so much as waver, even though they'd just slain a man where he sat. The shadow remained calm and unperturbed, like the serene surface of a lake in winter. They displayed no regret, no guilt, and no excitement. The fact that killing came so naturally to them was what Rodney found so terribly horrifying.

Rodney glared at the figure, refusing to let that fear overwhelm him, and as he did, he realized that their weapon was very familiar. It was almost the spitting image of Ouka, the katana Asuka cherished.

Could it be?

The instant the meaning of this dawned on him, everything clicked into place.

"You're...Koichiro Mikoshiba, aren't you?"

The shadow slowly turned to look at him. Their features were hidden behind their mask, so Rodney couldn't tell if they were affirming or denying his words.



“I’m asking you one more time. You are Koichiro Mikoshiba, aren’t you?” Rodney repeated, his tone a bit more firm.

The shadow wasn’t the slightest bit fazed by this. If Rodney’s assumption was correct, then it should have shaken the shadow’s composure, but they simply remained standing where they were.

What does this mean? Was I wrong?

The shadow’s behavior, or lack thereof, made Rodney second-guess himself.

“What are you doing, Rodney?!” Cardinal Roland boomed, chiding him. “Stop this man!”

The cardinal, who had been stunned from shock, finally recovered from his stupefied state and jolted into panic and alarm. He clung to the wall as he pointed a shaky finger at the shadowy figure.

Unfortunately for the cardinal, his reaction broke the stalemate, and the situation swung in the worst direction possible. The shadowy figure turned to Cardinal Roland and approached him in the same way they’d approached Count Winzer. Their intent was clear.

Once Rodney realized what was about to happen, his body unconsciously sprung into action.

I can’t let him kill the cardinal no matter what!

Tightening his grip on the sword in his left hand, Rodney swiftly closed the distance. Prana surged through his body, swirling as it made the Vishuddha chakra in his throat begin rotating. His muscles raged with strength, his nerves tingled with adrenaline, and his senses sharpened with precision. In this state, Rodney could cut down a bullet in motion.

Without slowing his charge, Rodney horizontally drew the sword from his waist and swept it diagonally with a single flowing slash.

The next moment, intense pain ran through Rodney’s arm. His severed right hand went flying through the air with a splatter of blood and hit the floor with a heavy thump, its fingers still gripping the sword Rodney had used for years.

An animalistic howl erupted from Rodney’s lips. With each beat of his heart,

his forearm spurted blood; he was bleeding profusely. The pain was agonizing, and Rodney mentally cursed the shadow standing in front of him.

But even when faced with Rodney's intense anger and hatred, the shadow's behavior remained the same. Ignoring Rodney like a pebble on the wayside, the shadow once again approached Cardinal Roland.

They were determined to kill the cardinal, it seemed, and Rodney was helpless to stop him. The pain became so intense that he couldn't maintain his martial thaumaturgy either. Overwhelmed by anger and agony, his aura began fading.

To hell with that bastard! He's still going after Cardinal Roland!

The shadow paused in front of the cardinal, then crouched down, reaching for his katana. In less than a second, Cardinal Roland's head would be separated from his neck.

Fortunately, rescue came from an unexpected direction. Rodney heard countless footsteps approaching from the corridor, and the next instant, Menea Norberg burst into the room with ten or so men.

Seeing Rodney crouching on the floor, holding his injured right arm, Menea went pale at once.

"Rodney! Are you all right?!"

Rodney managed to nod weakly in spite of his fading consciousness.



Koichiro gazed at Rodney and Menea's exchange with a sidelong glance.

What now, then? he asked himself.

Menea was trying to look composed so as to not worry Rodney any more, but she was covered in wounds. She'd likely had to fight her way here. Still, even though she wasn't nearly as hurt as Rodney, who'd lost his hand, Koichiro knew he could still easily beat her. Slaying the soldiers that hurried into the room wouldn't be difficult either. Martial thaumaturgy was strengthening his body to its limits, and he had years of refined martial skill under his belt, so it didn't matter how many foot soldiers incapable of thaumaturgy came his way.

Perhaps he couldn't cut down tens of thousands, but he could defeat a mere one hundred with the ease of chopping vegetables. Doing so would, however, take time.

The Temple Knights are in this city. If they notice the disturbance, they'll hurry over.

Koichiro's eyes fell to Kikka.

If I unleash Kikka's power, I could defeat five hundred Temple Knights with ease, but...

Koichiro knew that to silence all information regarding the firearm, he'd need to kill Cardinal Roland. But if he took the cardinal's life after he'd already severed Rodney's arm, their delegation's fate would become uncertain. If he wished to secure Asuka's safety, things were going in a bad direction.

Koichiro broke his stance and approached the box on the table. He checked its contents, then sprinted toward the window. A moment later, his body danced through the open air, leaving only the sound of shattering glass in its wake.

His movements were so swift and natural that no one could move to stop him. The most they could do was gaze in dumbfounded shock at the broken window, until eventually Menea's shouting rocked the room back into action.



"How did it go, Lord Koichiro?"

Zheng and Veronica, who had been out distracting the other guards, hurried to where Koichiro had landed under the window.

Koichiro glanced at them and held up the wooden box he'd collected from the room.

"This is it, for certain. For the time being, we must retreat."

Zheng and Veronica nodded, and all three sprinted toward the estate's walls.

Menea, eh? I see. Looking at the state Zheng is in, she must be quite skilled.

Zheng's spear was covered in the blood of others, yet his movements were visibly stiff. At Zheng's level, normal soldiers wouldn't be able to lay a scratch

on him, so he must have been busy stalling Menea.

Veronica, by contrast, seemed uninjured, but Koichiro could tell it wasn't because she'd been fooling around while they were fighting.

It's hard to make out over her black outfit, but...

Her body reeked of blood, implying that she'd handled at least several dozen soldiers.

Hm... I owe these two quite the debt, don't I?

Koichiro followed Zheng and Veronica, who hadn't said a single condescending word to him, and approached the wall. Glancing up at the sky as a single ray of moonlight shone through a gap in the clouds, Koichiro swore that someday he would return the favor.

Chapter 2: Betrayal and Friendship

Sparkling stars dotted the night sky. The air must have been quite clear for them to have been so visible. Had this been Ryoma's home world, their glow wouldn't have been so conspicuous.

It was a fantastic sight, and a love confession under this starry sky would've been wonderful. Sadly, the kind of plotting going on in a tent on the outskirts of Epirus didn't fit the romantic sky in any way. In fact, their topic of discussion was the furthest thing from love; it was the act of killing.

"So, lad, what do we do next?" a redheaded mercenary asked her master in a vulgar tone. She spoke in the same laid-back manner as usual, like she was talking to a friend or a brother-in-arms—certainly not a tone one would use with their liege. But right now, Lione wasn't speaking as a mercenary, but as a knight of the Mikoshiba barony.

No one present criticized Lione's behavior either. Mike and the members of the Crimson Lions naturally didn't mind. The Igasaki clan's ninjas, who looked up to Ryoma as their new lord, remained silent. And Dilphina and the dark elves, whom Nelcius had dispatched to watch over Ryoma, were quite indifferent to whatever ranks humans assigned themselves.

Needless to say, the Malfist sisters, who had sworn fealty to Ryoma, merely watched the proceedings until required to do otherwise. Had anyone else spoken to Ryoma the way Lione had, the Malfist sisters would have severed their head right then and there, leaving no room for apologies or excuses, but when it came to Lione, the sisters were oddly tolerant. After all, they'd worked with her ever since Wallace Heinkel, the then-guildmaster of the trade port Pherzaad, set them up and got them involved in Rhoadseria's civil war. They'd since shared the good and the bad, so their tolerance wasn't without reason. Or maybe they simply knew Lione's nature too well. The biggest reason they remained silent, though, was that their master allowed Lione to speak to him that way.

“Well...” Ryoma replied, not at all displeased with Lione’s tone, “based on what the Igasaki clan tells me, the tension between the refugees and the locals is already past the breaking point.”

Ryoma turned to the man standing behind him. Recognizing that Ryoma was urging him to go ahead, the man stepped forward and bowed to the group surrounding the table.

“It is as you say, milord. The plan is progressing smoothly. A brawl broke out yesterday in the refugee district, resulting in casualties among the locals. That seemed to have been the trigger. Half the knights and soldiers in Epirus have been sent out to maintain the city’s peace. So far, everything is going as planned.”

This man was a subordinate of Jinnai, who was currently stationed within Epirus’s walls.



His report made everyone sigh in relief.

“I see,” Lione said, shrugging as if she were disappointed. “After we pushed Robert and Signus back the other day, we were expectin’ them to counterattack, but it never happened. Here I was, thinkin’ the two of them were feeling the noose tightenin’, but I guess they were more occupied with the fact that their city’s become one gigantic volcano ready to erupt.”

“No, I’d say your work accomplished a lot,” Ryoma said, shaking his head. “Robert Bertrand and Signus Galveria are two of the ten houses’ most promising knights. If you hadn’t crippled their cavaliers in your battle, they could’ve sent their army to settle this war quickly on the field.”

“Was that part of yer calculations all along?” Lione asked.

Ryoma merely smiled. Lione was right, of course. This was all groundwork to lure Count Salzberg’s Twin Blades to his side.

“I gotta say, I feel bad for those two, with someone like you havin’ their eye on them.”

Ryoma snickered self-deprecatingly. “Can’t really argue with you there. I really did back them against the wall.”

Scheming against two skilled but underappreciated enemies required a great deal of spadework. First, Ryoma needed to figure out why, if they were so capable, nobody respected them. Then he would use that knowledge to lower their reputation among their peers even more. This was what their battle with Lione had been all about.

Signus and Robert were incredibly skilled warriors, so when they lost most of the knights the ten houses had lent them, their detractors had blamed them all the more. Ryoma had basically made them a bed of nails to sleep on.

“Are those two valuable enough to justify all that?” Lione asked.

“Yes, they are. But I don’t have to tell you that, Lione. You fought them, right?”

Lione placed a hand on her chin. Her thoughts wandered back to that battle and her impression of the soldiers Robert commanded.

He's not wrong. They do have a tendency to power through situations with brute force, but based on how they fought, they know when to pull out. They're first-rate warriors and commanders.

The biggest reason Lione beat them was because she'd prepared ahead of time. Robert had only chosen to charge because Ryoma hadn't used any tricks during the first battle. Lione had been able to stop them because her soldiers had worn heavy armor with weight-increasing seals, which Boltz had brought from the fortress.

Yes, Lione the Crimson Lioness had beaten Count Salzberg's Twin Blades in combat, but what had enabled that victory was Ryoma's plotting. It was like she had cooked the meal, but all the ingredients had already been cut up and prepared for use. That wasn't to say anyone else could have commanded the battle as well as she had, and her victory hadn't been guaranteed. Lione certainly hadn't thought she would win.

"Yer pretty scary, lad," Lione said with an exasperated smile.

A few people chuckled.

"Anyway, let's confirm our plans for tomorrow one last time," Ryoma said. "First, Lione, you take position in Epirus's outskirts and keep their army in check."

"Got it! Leave it to me!" Lione exclaimed, tapping her fist against her chest.

Ryoma turned to Dilphina next. "About our attack unit, I'll take Laura and Sara, as well as your group, Dilphina. It's a dangerous role, so do take care."

Dilphina exchanged looks with the other dark elves and nodded. Despite how perilous this task was, they were confident they could do it.

They've been hanging in the back so far, after all.

Nelcius, chief of one of the demi-human warrior clans on the peninsula, had handpicked Dilphina and her cohorts. They were few in number, but highly skilled. Ryoma normally would have delegated all sorts of work to them, but dark elves stood out in human society. Ryoma hoped to see mankind's relations with the demi-humans improve in the future, but at present, he couldn't ignore the fact that many factions were hostile toward demi-humans. At worst, he

could be branded a traitor to humankind and a holy war could break out. As such, he was limited in how he could use Dilphina and her warriors. But a sudden golden chance to make use of them had finally fallen into his lap, and the demi-humans were quite willing to seize it.

“Understood. We will open the path for you,” Dilphina said, and the other demi-humans sitting next to her nodded.

Ryoma nodded back in satisfaction and turned to Sakuya. “Lastly, I need the Igasaki clan to infiltrate the city, link up with Jinnai, and execute that plan. Got it? This is the most important role out of them all.”

The Igasaki ninjas all nodded. It was time to set their plan into motion.

“So, if there are no more questions, let’s conclude this meeting. We begin tomorrow night, so prepare accordingly.”

Everyone raised their voices and pumped their fists toward the sky. They all knew how significant tomorrow’s battle would be, and their hearts burned with high morale—everyone except for Sakuya, who was there as Gennou’s proxy...

“Do you have a moment, milord?” Sakuya asked Ryoma after everyone had left.

Judging by Sakuya’s attitude, Ryoma already had a good idea of what she wanted to say. He nudged his chin toward the adjacent tent, the one where he slept, and with the Malfist sisters in tow, Ryoma led Sakuya to his tent.

After he told her to sit, he asked, “Are you against our plan, Sakuya?”

Sakuya gently nodded. Ryoma’s plan was a gamble, and even though preparations were already complete and all that was left was to carry it out, Sakuya doubted whether they needed to brave that risk right now.

“Yes,” Sakuya replied. “Sending a small force to infiltrate Epirus and assassinate Count Salzberg feels reckless.”

Sakuya recognized that Ryoma’s plan was the best possible option for the future, and she knew that canceling things now would create a plethora of problems. Nonetheless, if nothing else, she felt obligated to point out the

inherent danger. Everyone present in the tent, save for Ryoma, felt the same way.

I would understand if this was our only way to turn the tables, but...

Infiltrating the enemy's stronghold and eliminating their commander in order to finish the war was a well-known tactic, even in Japan. For example, in the battle of Okehazama during Japan's Warring States period, Nobunaga Oda claimed the head of Yoshimoto Imagawa and declared victory. A similar example happened during the conflict between House Shimazu and House Ryuzoji. Both houses were competing for superiority over the island Kyushu, and during the battle of Okitanawate, Iehisa Shimazu claimed the head of Takanobu Ryuzoji.

Given that the tactic had been used successfully not just in Japan's history but throughout history across the world, going after the commander's head was a reasonable choice. However, in those two battles, the winning side had done so through a surprise attack. In the battle of Okehazama, Oda's army had somewhere between 2,500 to 5,000 troops, whereas Yoshimoto Imagawa's army had 25,000 to 45,000 troops—meaning Oda had to face an army ten times his size. The sizes of the two armies in the battle of Okitanawate weren't as drastically different in size, but Shimazu's army still had just 10,000 to Ryuzoji's 50,000.

Historians have disputed the size of those armies, and the victors could've tweaked the numbers to make their victories seem more impressive, so it was hard to determine what the numbers actually were. Nonetheless, these cases proved that a surprise attack was a valid way of overturning a numerical disadvantage. But any surprise attack was, by its very nature, a gamble, equivalent to betting on the first three winners in a horse race. If one were to win, they would take it all, but in most cases, one was bound to lose. It was a high-stakes, long-odds bet.

And that was what Ryoma's plan amounted to. The Igasaki clan had gathered information to boost their chances of victory, but even so, facing the enemy commander head-on was a gamble no matter what.

And besides, Count Salzberg is...

Sakuya's heart was clouded with concern, which stemmed from some intelligence that the Igasaki clan had gleaned while looking into House Salzberg. The validity of that information was questionable, of course...

But if it's true...

Sakuya knew Ryoma was a strong warrior. During Rhoadseria's civil war, she'd failed to assassinate him and had been captured by the enemy without so much as injuring them. But even though she was confident in Ryoma's abilities, if that information regarding the count was correct, even Ryoma would be hard-pressed to win this battle. His odds were fifty-fifty, at best.

If only he could awaken Kikoku's full power.

Kikoku, the Wailing Demon, was the sword the Igasaki clan's first leader had tempered. The legends about it were grand and described it as a cursed blade that could dispel evil, cut down gods, and sever all of creation. Yet no one alive had ever seen it exhibit its true strength; no one had ever been able to draw out its power.

The Igasaki clan had appraised dozens of warriors over the years, but Kikoku had drained every single one of them of their prana the instant they touched its scabbard—except for Ryoma. This was why the Igasaki clan had wandered this world for the last five hundred years, to find a master Kikoku would acknowledge. But even when they found such a person, the blade didn't manifest the great powers spoken of in legend.

The only things that set Kikoku apart from ordinary katanas was that it repaired itself automatically and was sturdier than most blades. This did make it a useful weapon, because even though maintaining a weapon was part of a warrior's routine, it was still time-consuming work. But if that was all it could do, there were other weapons capable of the same. The Igasaki clan wouldn't have needed to fear, respect, and protect it for so many years.

The fact that they had done so implied that Kikoku still hid some kind of untapped power. However, no one knew what that power was. Was it sharpness that could cut through all creation, as spoken of in legend, or was it something else? What was necessary to draw out that power?

Kikoku certainly didn't reject Ryoma as its wielder, but as one of the future

elders of the Igasaki clan, Sakuya couldn't disregard the current situation. Letting Ryoma die in battle because Kikoku refused to awaken was one thing Sakuya was determined to prevent.

Despite Sakuya's worries, Ryoma smiled at her. "I do understand how you feel. I planned this out assuming I had a good chance of winning. See, you're probably right that my victory isn't certain, but if you're gonna say that...starting this war was a gamble to begin with, right?"

Ryoma drew Kikoku from its scabbard. A gust blew through the tent, and in the whistling of the wind, Sakuya could hear what sounded like the wailing of a demon. She felt as if a cold hand had grabbed her beating heart. Her breath caught in her throat.

What...was that?

Sakuya had heard Kikoku's cries before, but this was the first time she'd felt this suffocating pressure. It was like the hateful, grudge-ridden howling of a woman.

"Did you hear it?" Ryoma asked.

Sakuya desperately nodded as she gasped for breath. Something emanating from the blade had overwhelmed her.

"That's Kikoku," Ryoma said as he settled the sword back into its scabbard. "Just like its name implies, it's a blade that wails like a demon."

The moment Ryoma sheathed Kikoku, Sakuya felt her heart begin to beat again.

"You're saying that just now was...?" If that was its power, then Kikoku truly was a cursed sword.

Ryoma shook his head. "Well, that was part of its power, but...it's not all of it."

"That wasn't all of it?" Sakuya asked, puzzled.

"I'm working hard to get this sword to recognize me, and recently, I've started to realize, little by little, what it expects out of its wielder."

In short, Kikoku demanded prana. The more prana it sucked up, the sharper

its blade became. Someday, it could very well cut through all creation, like the legend stated.

“That said, this sword is one tough customer,” Ryoma remarked.

“What do you mean?” Sakuya questioned.

“Let’s just say Kikoku is something of a gourmand. Not just any prana will do.”

“A gourmand? It has preferences for the...taste of the prana it sucks up?”

Ryoma nodded. He’d first realized this during the expedition to Xarooda, when he slew Greg Moore, an O’ltormean knight and the commanding officer of Fort Notis’s garrison. When he killed Moore, he’d gotten the impression that Kikoku had become slightly sharper than before.

At the time, Ryoma had assumed he was imagining things. After all, Kikoku had sucked up prana even before they arrived at the Notis Plains, back when they passed through the mountain region south of Memphis and ran into an eagle lord. The Malfist sisters had beaten the creature using a Catastrophe Tornado spell, but Ryoma had dealt the finishing blow and fed it’s prana to Kikoku.

Therein lay the problem. Had Kikoku simply demanded the prana of any creature, it should have easily awakened with the eagle lord. Eagle lords were massive monsters, forces of nature, and they had vast amounts of prana. For as skilled as Greg Moore had been, his prana had been limited because he was human. Had he been one of the transcendents spoken of in legend, perhaps things would have been different, but as he was, he couldn’t have possibly had more prana than an eagle lord.

As Ryoma continued to wield Kikoku, he’d begun to speculate that it was feeding specifically on the prana of humans. He’d become convinced of it a few days ago, when he slew Vector Chronicle in Viscount Bahenna’s territory.

There was no doubt that Kikoku was beginning to exhibit a power unlike before. Ryoma wasn’t sure if “awakening” was the right word to describe it, but it felt like something akin to that. The pressure Sakuya had felt earlier was one of its emerging abilities.

“This sword wants the prana of warriors, and the more skilled they are, the

more it longs for their prana. It's like it *wants* me to kill powerful opponents."

Sakuya gasped. "Are you saying it wants Count Salzberg's prana?"

Ryoma shrugged. He couldn't tell for sure what the sword wanted, but that was the feeling he got. Besides, he had other reasons to seek out battle with Count Salzberg. In fact, feeding Kikoku was almost an afterthought.

"The information the Igasaki clan discovered earlier was concerning, so I understand your doubts," Ryoma said, "but we made an agreement with Signus, and we can't go back on our word right now."

Ryoma wanted Signus Galveria and Robert Bertrand on his side at all costs. Lione and the Crimson Lions were skilled; they were competent teachers for the slave children, and their experience on the battlefield had made them perceptive. Still, none of them stood out individually. Boltz and Lione were the most skilled, but Boltz was missing an arm, and Lione was—no matter how favorably one looked at it—a mediocre warrior. Both were capable commanders, and Ryoma deeply trusted and depended on them, but they weren't suitable for leading a charge into battle.

Signus and Robert were the opposite of that. They were adept commanders, but their real value lay in their individual martial prowess. Once Ryoma had learned that, he'd decided that he absolutely wanted them as his retainers, and he was willing to brave a little danger to make it happen. If he had to go to extreme lengths to get them on his side, he wouldn't back down. Settling for less would only make his survival later down the line uncertain.

I have to keep the future in mind, Ryoma thought.

Count Salzberg was a formidable foe, but once Ryoma beat him, war with an even greater enemy awaited. To win that coming war, he needed Signus and Robert's strength, so even if it meant treading down a dangerous road, Ryoma would unflinchingly do so. His future survival was on the line.

Watching her master, Sakuya silently bowed her head, swearing in her heart that she would put forth her best efforts in tomorrow's coming battle.

And so ended that fateful night.

Countless torches waded through the dark, their light like a river leading to the heart of Epirus. Angered shouts, jeering, and feverish wrath embroiled the city.

“So it begins... Just like he said it would,” Signus Galveria murmured, closing the curtains on his window. He then took out a letter from his desk drawer and sank into his sofa, looking up at the ceiling.

It had all begun a week ago, when the refugees stabbed a young man from Epirus’s slums in the stomach, killing him. Normally, the young man’s death wouldn’t have been this significant—people passed away every day—but in this situation, the way and the reason he died were important. Monsters infested the areas outside of cities, and medicine was severely primitive, so death was a very common occurrence. People felt angry and sorrowful just the same, but unfortunate as it was, this world trained them to come to terms with their emotions.

There were plenty of absurdities in this world, more than a person living in modern society would normally experience—things like frightening monsters, overbearing nobles, and the coldhearted ruling class. Earthquakes were rare, perhaps because the earth’s crust was firm, but typhoons and tornadoes occurred frequently. Not to mention, there was the possibility that one could lose their fortune or even their life in a war. All of those things were terrible and infuriating, but if one got angry at every single thing, one wouldn’t survive for long. Even the weaker classes of society understood this in their own way.

However, this time was different. Animosity and antagonism were already brewing between the residents and the refugees, and the discontent and anger in the residents’ hearts had finally reached critical mass. They’d picked up clubs and whatever knives they had at home and attacked the refugees, demanding that the refugees give back their normal lives. This, of course, had spurred the refugees to retaliate in defense, leading to a large-scale clash where each side inflicted casualties on the other.

Signus understood how the refugees felt. It had been a month since Ryoma Mikoshiba had raided the ten houses’ territories and left many of them without a home, forcing them to turn to Epirus for help. And during that month, the same rulers who’d extorted taxes from them seemingly did nothing to help

them in their plight.

That wasn't to say that the refugees got no help at all, though. They'd received food rations meant for disasters, and the knights had begun to patrol the streets to maintain the peace. But though Epirus was a major citadel and a key location in northern Rhoadseria, there was still a limit to the number of people it could accommodate within its walls.

With refugees from all across the north flooding the city, House Salzberg could do very little to help. This was the grim reality, despite Count Salzberg's riches, especially considering that his expenses almost matched his income. While things weren't nearly bad enough to bring about a total economic collapse, it was doubtful whether they had enough supplies in stock to withstand a catastrophe of this scale.

A noble's duty...

Anger, sorrow, guilt, and conflict burned in Signus's heart. Truth be told, he couldn't quite put his emotions into words, but that did little to lessen their weight.

I knew all of this ahead of time. The discord between Epirus's people and the refugees was reaching its breaking point, so all one would have to do is wait for the right time to tip the scales. And he could manage that with ease.

Everyone was desperate to protect their families, their lives, and their livelihood, and all it would take was the slightest poke of the needle to make the situation pop like a festering blister. Indeed, all that would remain was a terrible, unsightly scar.

This world is the direct opposite of the utopia the Church of Meneos's clergy preach about it.

Here, the strong feasted upon the weak, the weak devoured those who were yet weaker, and the powerful cannibalized one another. Everyone had to fight for their own survival. That was true even for Signus Galveria, one of the strongest men in northern Rhoadseria. This was a place where the foolish and the weak were trampled on and taken advantage of.

In the end, it all went how he set it up. The only question is what I do next.

Conflicted emotions rushed through Signus's heart like a muddy river.

Signus had first made contact with a man working for Ryoma Mikoshiba near the war's beginning, soon after he first locked blades with Ryoma's forces on Epirus's outskirts. Clad entirely in black, the man had looked like an assassin, and he'd moved like a shadow, masking his presence as he made his way to Signus's room in the castle.

Doing such a thing was difficult even during peacetime, and the masked man would have had to go past countless guards to reach his room. On top of that, they were in the middle of a war, so security was twice as tight as in peacetime. Under those conditions, and with no one noticing him, the man had managed to sneak into Signus's room. It had been a frightening display of skill.

When Signus reached for his sword, surprised by the sudden, uninvited guest, the masked man had whispered, "Would you and Robert Bertrand be interested in serving the Mikoshiba barony?"

At the time, Signus had laughed off the idea. Ryoma Mikoshiba's soldiers were surprisingly skilled, but that wasn't enough to decide a battle. Ryoma might have been a difficult opponent, but Signus had no cause to admit defeat at that point. More importantly, he had reasons that prevented him from betraying House Galveria, and so long as those circumstances stood, he couldn't afford to betray Count Salzberg, the alliance leader his family served.

Or rather, I couldn't at the time.

When they first met, the man had silently accepted Signus's rejection and disappeared. But on the night the refugees began flooding into Epirus, he'd appeared again to deliver a letter.

Signus had been shocked beyond all description at the letter's contents. At first, he'd suspected that it was some kind of scheme, but it was certainly written in Elmada's handwriting. Elmada was the wet nurse he'd known since infancy, and while Signus might mistake his estranged parents' handwriting, he would never mistake hers.

Despair had overcome Signus; his beloved wet nurse was in the enemy's clutches. Eventually, though, he began seeing things another way. Maybe this predicament was a chance to turn his life around.

The letter said she was fine, but the fact that Ryoma Mikoshiba's people brought it to me can only mean one thing.

Elmada was Signus's one true relative. He felt nothing for either of his birth parents, but he saw her as a mother. And if it was for her, Signus would give up his life.

No, that's just a cowardly excuse.

Signus had already decided on his new course the day he sent Ryoma his reply, and no amount of sugarcoating would change that. He'd made his choice to change his fate with his own two hands.

Just as that thought crossed his mind, Signus heard a loud knock on his door.

"Signus! It's me, Robert. Things went south! We need to get going, now."

The voice had come from a man Signus knew to be a cynical contrarian. As a noble, Robert was the most unenthusiastic about this war, but he was also one of Signus's only friends, and Signus knew that contrary to what others thought of Robert, he was a proud and duty-bound man.

Robert had probably hurried over once he'd realized what was happening outside. Signus could hear him through the door, breathing heavily.

"I'll open the door. Give me a minute," Signus responded.

Signus had heard Robert complain about this war countless times already, but despite that, Robert had come in a panic as soon as he heard of Count Salzberg's crisis. That couldn't have been just his sense of duty as a general. It was proof that though Robert often criticized Count Salzberg as a shitty old man, Robert truly respected the count.

This was why Signus couldn't mention the idea of betraying Count Salzberg to Robert. Doing so would surely fracture their long-standing friendship. However, at the same time, it was clear to Signus that Robert wouldn't have a future if he were to stick to the count.

I guess I just have to go for it.

Ryoma Mikoshiba had ordered Signus to perform a certain task for him. Signus rose from his sofa, opened his desk drawer, and pulled out a slip of

paper with powder on it. Signus silently apologized to Robert as he looked at it.

Robert, on that day, you told me to think of myself. I'm sorry, but this time I'll take you up on that. And when it's all over, I'll let you pass judgment on me...even if you decide you want my head for this.

That was the greatest penance Signus could offer, but no one could understand how he felt. In the end, that apology was just his way of easing his guilt and shame, and he knew it.

Signus took two glasses from a nearby shelf and placed them on the table. Then he took out a bottle of alcohol from a cupboard, unsealed it, and poured the powder into it.

"Thanks for waiting. Come in," Signus called.

As soon as he said that, Robert boisterously burst into the room. "What were you doing, Signus?!" he asked angrily.

"What's wrong with you? You're in a terribly foul mood," Signus replied, sitting on the sofa and feigning ignorance.



“What are you saying?!” Robert lashed out at him. “Have you looked outside your damn window?!”

Robert reached for the bottle sitting in front of him and took a swig. His excitement had made him thirsty, it seemed. He then wiped his mouth roughly with the back of his hand and vigorously sat down on the sofa.

“Come on, Robert, I went out of my way to set a glass for you,” Signus said in exasperation.

Robert snorted at him, displeased with his attitude, and took a second swig from the bottle. Then he eyed Signus suspiciously. Maybe his warrior’s intuition had kicked in.

“You’re awfully calm,” Robert muttered, his eyes glaring into Signus’s.

Signus said nothing and grabbed the bottle out of Robert’s hands and took a swig. The alcohol overflowed from his lips, trickling down to his chest.

Perhaps sensing something strange from Signus’s behavior, Robert hurriedly got to his feet...but then all the strength suddenly drained from his body.

“Signus... You didn’t...”

Robert’s body went numb, and his tongue turned so heavy that he slurred his words. Before he knew it, he collapsed onto the sofa.

Signus silently glared at Robert’s limp form as he felt the drug begin to run through his own veins.

Chapter 3: A Warrior's Way of Life

That night, Count Salzberg ignored the chaos brewing outside his estate and shut himself up in his study. Oddly enough, he was wearing a set of armor, a family heirloom that he hadn't put on in years, and was seated on a chair with his sword leaned against it. This was even more surprising given the time of day, when he'd usually have snatched one of the maids to have some fun.

Nevertheless, some things remained the same—like the countless bottles of alcohol rolling around Count Salzberg's chair, for example. There were enough of them to knock most people into a drunken slumber, but Count Salzberg's mind was currently as sharp as a whip, his eyes glinting ferociously like an animal as he stared into space.

Feeling the long-forgotten anger flare up in his heart, Count Salzberg took a swig from the bottle in his hand. This sensation had constantly haunted his mind until the fateful day he claimed the title of count from his father. It was a sixth sense, a sort of precognition people naturally acquired when they spent every day fighting for their lives.

Back then, I hated this feeling with a passion.

The sensation was an alarm bell, and the fact that he felt it so strongly now meant he was somewhere dangerous. The problem was that he—the count, head of House Salzberg—was the one exposed to this danger.

Normally, one developed a warrior's intuition by surviving countless battles, but there were two possible reasons why Count Salzberg had it: he was born a genius warrior or he did indeed see many battlefields despite his status as House Salzberg's eldest son. And Thomas Salzberg was not born a genius warrior.

But looking back on it now, it wasn't all bad.

At present, the citadel city of Epirus was a danger zone. The refugees that had flooded the city were currently locked in a violent clash with the city's residents,

and even his castle, guarded as it was by soldiers, was caught up in the ensuing chaos. Just earlier he'd received a report that the granary had caught fire, and it clearly hadn't been an accident or spontaneous combustion of some kind.

He's behind this; there's no doubt about it.

The face of that hulking young man surfaced in his mind. Normally, just thinking of Ryoma Mikoshiba would anger him to no end, but now a smirk stretched across his lips. After all, Ryoma was an enemy, one he would have to kill. But perhaps because Ryoma was his rival, Count Salzberg felt something akin to affinity with him. Compared to the foolish commoners and the heads of the ten houses of the north, who pestered him about their wants and needs every day, Ryoma Mikoshiba was several times better, even if Ryoma was his enemy.

This is all because of my father.

His father's face surfaced in his mind next, and he spat bitterly at the floor. Spitting in one's own home was beyond ill-mannered, and even though he wasn't going to be the one to clean it up, it still didn't feel right to do it. Tonight, though, Count Salzberg was going to let his heart do as it pleased.

Ever since that day, I've lived like a dead man walking...

Count Salzberg's father had been a man brimming with loyalty and nobility, a man of character respected by both his subjects and his vassals for his sagacious wisdom. He'd also been a powerful warrior who had blocked his neighboring countries' many invasions over the years. And he had been a good father. As a governor, a soldier, and a father, he'd been a cut above the rest, and not even Count Salzberg, who hated him from the bottom of his heart, could deny that.

Be that as it may, Count Salzberg couldn't respect his father because back then, on the day he'd found out about his father's plot, the glorified image of his father had shattered to pieces. His father had planned to have not Thomas—who had the blood of Rearth running through his veins—but the second son he'd raised in secret inherit the headship of House Salzberg.

Had it been just that, Count Salzberg would have been better off. Relinquishing the headship to his brother would have angered him, but he might have come to terms with it in time. If nothing else, he wouldn't have cut

off his brother's head had it been just that. The problem was the method his father had chosen to expel his legitimate child. It was an unforgivable act, so much so that one wouldn't even pardon their family for it. Or rather, they wouldn't be able to forgive such an act precisely because a blood relative had done it.

Count Salzberg took another bottle from the table, gulped down the wine inside it, and turned his eyes to the door.

Hm... Looks like he's here. Yulia really did turn to the enemy's side, didn't she?

He could tell the person he was waiting for had arrived. The anger Count Salzberg felt for him since the outbreak of the war had all but faded now, and the only thing left in its wake was the resolve and fighting spirit of a man who'd accepted his fate.

He could avoid this battle if he so wanted, of course. There were several secret passageways in Epirus, some of which even his wife Yulia wasn't aware of.

Well, considering Yulia's attitude so far, I should be thankful she didn't poison me or plan to kill me with an "accident."

Count Salzberg had already suspected that Lady Yulia had turned to the enemy's side. When did he realize it? At first it had just been a small sense of discomfort, but by now he was convinced that she'd led a large number of enemy soldiers into his castle.

His fort was on the verge of falling, but there were still plays he could make even in this situation. It would be difficult to escape with his troops, but if he wanted to escape alone, he had the means to do it. So long as he could survive this situation, it was possible he could turn the tables.

Count Salzberg had many relatives and was a prominent noble within Rhoadseria's aristocracy. If he were to ask his relatives for help, they wouldn't turn him down, and if he were to add the ten houses of the north's relatives to that, he could certainly gather an army of ten thousand. On top of that, Queen Lupis saw Ryoma Mikoshiba as an enemy and a threat. All the spies he'd sent to investigate the Wortenia Peninsula had been sent on her order, and it was evident she was looking for reasons to find fault with him. If he could just

manage to escape, he would have multiple avenues with which to turn the situation around.

However, winning that way would be meaningless. He was strong, and winning by resorting to begging another family for mercy was a shame he would never live down. His warrior's pride wouldn't permit it.

Besides, doing that would waste this wonderful chance.

Facing a powerful opponent made Count Salzberg's warrior's blood boil with an excitement he'd nearly forgotten.

"Come in, the door is unlocked," Count Salzberg called. The door immediately opened. "Oh, I thought you'd hesitate a bit. I'm not sure if you're dauntless or just plain thoughtless."

Count Salzberg smirked at the man who appeared before him. His visitor was being far too reckless for his attitude. This man was currently standing in the heart of the enemy's stronghold, and surprise attacks and traps were to be expected in war. The fact that he'd entered the room without hesitation when the enemy beckoned him inside surely seemed like the height of stupidity. But, at the same time, it also showed he was confident in his abilities.

The man scratched his head awkwardly. "Well, I'm not thoughtless. I just didn't see a man like you relying on cheap tricks."

"I see. In that case, I have nothing to say to that." Count Salzberg laughed loudly. "It's been a long while, Baron Mikoshiba. I believe the last time we met was when your army visited on the way to Xarooda?"

"Yes. You were a great help to us back then," Ryoma said with a smile, bowing his head.

Though Count Salzberg had taken a rather sizable mediator's fee, his connections in Rhoadseria's north did prove extremely useful. One could very well say that Ryoma owed the count a debt of gratitude.

Amused, Count Salzberg said, "Incidentally, I don't see the two sisters who always follow you. Where are they?"

"Oh, I had them leave for now. I need them to handle a few other matters for

me.”

Count Salzberg smiled in satisfaction, perhaps gleaning some hidden meaning in Ryoma’s words. “I see. You’ve got your own share of problems, don’t you?”

“Oh, don’t get me started. I may have risen up in the world, but that just means there are always issues to take care of.”

In truth, Ryoma hadn’t moved up in the world because he’d wanted to. He’d met Queen Lupis, earned impressive martial achievements, and gained territory of his own either by coincidence or chance. But while he had, at first, drifted into this situation, he couldn’t give it up now. Doing so would mean that the opponents he’d taken down would have died for nothing and that he’d put his friends’ futures at risk.

Sensing Ryoma’s emotions, Count Salzberg laughed again. “Good, good. Knowing trouble when you’re young promotes growth. Keep at it,” he said, directing a probing glance at Ryoma. “Pardon me for changing the topic, but all the chaos that’s been going on the last few days was your handiwork, right?”

“Yes. I did it to keep your guards occupied.”

This was a very dangerous topic, but they spoke of it like they were discussing something trivial over tea.

“Hm, well, your plan worked. I had to send most of my soldiers to town to keep things under control. Splendid job overall, but don’t you think it was foul play? I spoke to Signus and Robert after the first battle, and apparently your soldiers are pretty capable. I underestimated you when I heard your army was made up of women and children, but honestly, I’m surprised. With them on your side, you could have matched me without resorting to petty tricks.”

“Going head-to-head with you like a reckless fool would just cost me soldiers,” Ryoma replied.

Count Salzberg forced a smile.

There was no point in needlessly sending soldiers to their deaths. Much like pawns in chess, soldiers were perhaps disposable, but that didn’t mean it would be wise to throw them away for no reason. And unlike inanimate chess pieces, their soldiers were living, breathing human beings, so they couldn’t treat them

too terribly.

For a commander, Ryoma's logic was rational, but Count Salzberg could discern the meaning hidden behind Ryoma's actions.

"I see. You hated the idea of losing troops. Which means you're not going to stop with this war, are you? Lupis Rhoadserians is your next target, isn't she?"

Ryoma remained silent, but the vicious smile that spread on his lips told the whole story.

"Hmph. I swear, I simply can't understand you," Count Salzberg continued. "Why are you so insistent on going through with this? True, Queen Lupis broke her pact with you, but you're dealing with a queen. Given the class difference, it's only natural that would happen. And even if she did break her word, she did repay your services generously. Promoting a commoner to a land-owning noble is unheard of in this land. Surely you realize that."

This was both a warning from the bottom of Count Salzberg's heart and a doubt he wanted answered.

But that emotion didn't reach Ryoma. With a sneer, he answered, "Are you telling me to obey that woman and live the rest of my life with my head down?"

The class system was widely upheld in this world, and as such, Ryoma Mikoshiba was certainly in the wrong for saying this. As justified as his anger was, it only applied when the other party was his equal. A teacher can scold a student, but few students would criticize their teachers. Doing so took a great amount of courage. A boss can rake their subordinate over the coals, but an employee can't fault a superior for their mistakes. The most they could do was resign.

It was easy to say the class system didn't exist in modern times, but that was a falsehood. Even in modern society, not everyone is equal. That held even more true in this world, so Ryoma wasn't standing on even ground with Queen Lupis.

"I'll agree that it's irritating," Count Salzberg continued, "but would obeying her really be that bad? Your status as a noble can give you so much. You'll have all the money and women you could ever want. You could wear the best

clothes, relish in the finest wine, and share your bed with the most beautiful lovers in the land. That's worth so much more than needlessly fighting a war, isn't it?"

"Well, I can't deny that..." Ryoma nodded. "You're probably right."

Ryoma was a healthy young man. He wanted to spend his nights with beautiful women as much as any man did, and he longed for delicious food. He wasn't very picky when it came to clothes, but he did prefer wearing fine clothes to dirty rags. Yet there was something else that mattered more to Ryoma than all of that, something that couldn't be replaced with physical belongings. Trying to replace it would simply make it fade away.

"I understand what you're trying to say, Count," Ryoma said. He took a deep breath. "But I think some things are more important than that."

"Oh? Like what?" Count Salzberg replied with an amused smile. He probably already knew what Ryoma meant but had asked that question anyway.

Countless answers surfaced in Ryoma's mind, all of them feeling equal parts correct and insufficient. *When he puts it like that, it's hard to decide. Justice? Virtue? Nobility and conquest? Love and friendship? Anger and hatred. They all feel right and wrong in their own ways.* All sorts of emotions filled his heart, but none of them felt like the right one.

"I don't know. Like what, indeed?" Ryoma eventually said.

Those words reflected his heart at the moment. Any lofty ideal would have been reduced to meaningless waste the second he tried to put it into words. But although he couldn't describe his emotions verbally, his heart didn't waver. His eyes still burned with pride.

In his rival's eyes, Count Salzberg saw something he'd lost on the day he killed his father to steal his noble title.

"You have youth on your side, and I envy you for that." Count Salzberg narrowed his eyes longingly and then shook his head. "I...I cast aside that kind of emotion a long time ago."

He genuinely did envy Ryoma. He'd once had the same unyielding nature, but he had eventually lost it.

“Was that why that incident happened?” Ryoma suddenly asked.

The color drained from Count Salzberg’s face. “What do you mean?” he questioned, trying to maintain his composure but failing to stop his expression from stiffening.

He’d boasted both martial and political accomplishments even before he gained the title of count, but at some point, he’d suddenly cast it all away in the name of his desires and pleasures. This must have been the reason behind it.

“Count Salzberg, Helena told me a lot about you. She said you were a powerful warrior who supported northern Rhoadseria’s defenses on the front lines. And she also told me why you changed...”

That question didn’t need answering right now. What mattered most to Ryoma was killing Count Salzberg immediately and without fail. But he had to know. He needed Count Salzberg to admit, from his own lips, what brought upon his change.

“Ah... Yes, come to think of it, Lady Helena was there when it happened.”

Under Ryoma’s direct gaze, Count Salzberg slowly began to speak.

“When was it that I first stood on the battlefield? At the time, we were fighting against Xarooda nonstop, year after year. I think that was, what, twenty years ago?”

Thomas Salzberg had first experienced battle in his early teens. He’d been graced with the talent and physique for combat, which he’d inherited from his father, and the ability to draw more prana from his defeated opponents, a trait he’d received from his otherworlder mother. Having been born into an environment that allowed him to foster his inborn gifts, Thomas became a skilled warrior, worthy of the ruling class.

“In my first battle, I killed twenty-five Xaroodian knights and butchered many conscripted commoners,” he said, his voice brimming with pride.

In Ryoma’s world, a noble’s first son should have no need to stand on the front lines. It was seen as reckless and dangerous. But things were different in this world. Here, those of higher status were required to seek out further strength. That was because monsters, powerful creatures that far exceeded

ordinary animals, infested the land and thaumaturgy existed.

Those skilled in martial thaumaturgy were like one-man armies—quite literally—and legends of warriors who’d fully mastered it were sung far and wide. Numbers were still a major factor in war, but the truly powerful warriors could overcome that with sheer strength. This meant that generals and kings had to match their warriors, otherwise they wouldn’t survive. That was why so many of the royals and nobles were skilled in combat. Those that weren’t inherited their households under special circumstances and fostered indispensable talents in other fields instead.

“When I was young,” Count Salzberg continued, “I aspired to become a good governor, the sort of ruler the commoners looked up to. I believed that ensuring my subjects’ livelihoods and protecting my domain from invaders was all that mattered.”

Ryoma nodded. The information the Igasaki clan had gathered had indicated that Count Salzberg was very different before he inherited his title. Though he’d fought on the most violent of battlefields, he’d proved to be a loyal warrior who devoted his life to defending Rhoadseria’s northern borders and a noble heir who always put the lives of his people first.

Those descriptions seemed far removed from the count Ryoma knew, but Count Salzberg truly had been that kind of person in his youth. However, it had all changed over a decade ago, a year before Helena Steiner lost her beloved family to the late Hodram Albrecht’s scheme.

“That night, there were heavy clouds in the sky. Just like today...” Count Salzberg whispered.

Ryoma nodded and turned his eyes to the window. “You mean the night you lost your fiancée?”

“Yes. The night I lost the woman I loved with all my heart.”

The scenery of that night flashed before Count Salzberg’s eyes. It wasn’t a heartwarming or a wistful memory, but a painful recollection full of humiliation and scorn.

I suppose anyone would become warped after something like that, Ryoma

thought. *Though I can't help but feel that it's a shame.*

This was what had made Thomas Salzberg, a young hero, veer off the proper path. It was a story of love, lust, envy, and jealousy, worthy of the great myths.

Thomas Salzberg had once been in love with a woman he'd sworn to marry since childhood—the second daughter of Viscount Muebach, Asteria. Though the viscount's domain was small, it was near the capital Pireas, and its land served as an influential trade center. The viscount was also blood relations with the esteemed Marquis Halcyon, a leading figure in the nobles' faction.

Count Salzberg had been close with Lady Asteria Muebach since they were children. They would frequently visit each other's estates, and the servants who'd worked for House Salzberg for years would warmly look on as the two played in the garden together. Of course, just because they'd been close as children didn't mean they'd feel the same as adults. In many cases, time changes a relationship. In addition, Viscount Muebach was a major player in the nobles' faction, with territory near the capital, so as his children grew older, they were expected to attend balls, tea parties, and plays to mingle with other nobles.

That didn't apply to House Salzberg, though. Their domain and rank was greater than House Muebach's, and despite living in a remote region, they were praised for holding off external threats, including the Wortenia Peninsula. But within Rhoadseria's power balance, they were merely another warrior house located far from the capital, near the border. Their influence was limited to northern Rhoadseria, and their rank in the court was only what their noble title granted them. They might have been famous, but their renown offered little benefit.

Had the former heads of House Salzberg worked to further their political influence along with their martial prowess, maybe things would have been different. But their warrior's nature made them refrain from joining any of Rhoadseria's factions.

As warriors, prioritizing their military might was the right thing to do, but as nobles, that was a mistake. People dislike those who try to present themselves as different, and many of Rhoadseria's aristocrats saw House Salzberg, a house

that rarely showed itself in the palace, as pariahs.

Despite this, House Salzberg had managed to retain a careful balance with the other nobles...until Thomas Salzberg tipped the scales, leading to the incident that took place on that fateful night.

“It seemed that the honor and glory I attained were becoming eyesores to the other nobles,” Count Salzberg explained.

Thomas Salzberg has slain the enemy general during a battle with the Kingdom of Myest, earning a brilliant victory for Rhoadseria. Helena Steiner, who had been deployed to the north as reinforcements, personally relayed his achievement to King Pharst II. Helena had meant no ill will, and as the general in charge of all military affairs in Rhoadseria, she’d merely done what was expected of her—praising a knight who made a major achievement in battle was the natural thing to do. Unfortunately, that report only made things worse.

Thomas Salzberg was beckoned to the capital to attend an evening party hosted by the king. It was there he saw it—his fiancée, Asteria Muebach, laughing as some noble’s son led her to the dance floor.

It wasn’t forbidden for noble ladies to dance with gentlemen, even if they weren’t married or engaged to them, but it was certainly unusual. The woman’s fiancé would always get the first dance, and she would have to ask him for permission to accept any others. If those laws of decorum weren’t upheld, things could devolve into an outright duel.

Needless to say, Asteria had not asked Thomas for permission. Perhaps she couldn’t be faulted for that. It was up to her parents to teach her these unspoken rules, and Thomas had never attended an evening party to begin with. She probably never expected him to be there on that particular night.

Unfortunately, by coincidence or misfortune, Thomas saw this happen, and the moment he did, only one option came to mind. He tried to step between the two of them, saying that Asteria was his betrothed. However...Asteria met him with cold silence, which then earned him the scorn of everyone in attendance.

“And that was their plan all along,” Count Salzberg spat, his face contorted in rage.

Being young and inexperienced, Thomas hadn't realized the meaning behind his fiancée's actions, nor did he realize the intentions of the Muebach viscounty when they conspired to make this happen.

At the time, the nobles nearby had acted like they hadn't noticed anything while they internally sneered at him for his fiancée abandoning him. They saw him as a pathetic hero who let his betrothed get away.

The evening party meant to celebrate his heroics had cost him his fiancée and his manly pride. Nothing could have been more humiliating. Thomas Salzberg had had no choice but to leave the party, his heart burning with hatred as the jeers of the other nobles stabbed him in the back.

"Was that the reason for everything?" Ryoma asked, sighing. Ryoma did think this was a terrible story, but that alone couldn't have been enough to warp the count's heart. Engagements between nobles were always a matter of convenience for their families.

"Well, let's just say that was one reason..." Count Salzberg said, a ferocious grin on his lips.

An unexpected breakup with the woman he loved and the mocking of those around him had taught Count Salzberg that the people of this country weren't worth it. Why cast aside his own pleasure for them? But that couldn't have been the only reason his heart snapped the way it had. There must have been another, much more decisive event that caused it.

"I see. I'd like to hear what happened, if you don't mind."

Count Salzberg slowly shook his head and drew the sword sitting beside him from its scabbard. "No, it's getting late," he said, his voice stiff and cold as ice. "From here on out, we'll let our swords do the talking."

He held up his sword, the candle's light glinting against its blade. His stance silently communicated that he had no intention of continuing this conversation.

"That right? Well, so be it," Ryoma replied.

Truth be told, Ryoma wanted to finish this conversation. After he unified the north, Ryoma would once again have to make his way to the capital, and his next opponents would be the ruler of this country, Queen Lupis Rhoadserians,

and the nobles supporting her. Count Salzberg's words were a valuable source of information for studying his enemies. But Ryoma could see that continuing would hurt Count Salzberg all the more.

Well, no matter. I already know the general outline of what happened.

"Let's do this, then," Ryoma said, drawing Kikoku from its sheath and holding it up in an offensive stance. As soon as he did, a demonic howling filled the room. It was the same voice, the same oppressive pressure, that Sakuya had experienced the night prior.

It seemed the howling had little effect on Count Salzberg, though. "I see. So you have a thaumaturgical sword of your own," he said. "We're on equal footing, then."

With that last word, Count Salzberg vanished from Ryoma's sight. He was augmenting his physical prowess with martial thaumaturgy, which allowed him to move at blistering speeds.

A heavy metallic clash rang out, and red sparks sprayed into the air. Ryoma saw Count Salzberg's face just inches from his own, close enough to feel his opponent's breath. Then, in the blink of an eye, their overlapped shadows parted from each other as they jumped away, creating some distance between them.

I wasn't able to block it.

Noting the cut on his right arm, Ryoma felt a rush of exhilaration as he stared at Count Salzberg. The count stood firm, his stance perfect and bereft of openings.

Thanks to the practice matches he'd had with his grandfather Koichiro, Ryoma had built up a resistance to pain. That wasn't to say that he felt none at all, but rather that he'd developed an extreme tolerance for it. Furthermore, his numerous training battles back in Rearth had taught Ryoma that pain could decide the battle's outcome. In duels, where one's life was on the line, a tolerance for pain could separate the winners from the dead.

That's another thing I need to thank Gramps for...

When it came to assessing danger, ignoring the pain could cause problems,

but if one let pain paralyze them with fear and disrupt their attacks, it would be even more fatal. It was possible to suppress instinct with force of will and bloodlust, but doing so could affect one's performance. There was only one way to prevent that—getting used to it. Ryoma owed the fact that he could lock blades with Count Salzberg right now to his grandfather and the arduous training he'd put Ryoma through.

Count Salzberg's lips curled into a smile reminiscent of a carnivore feasting upon its prey's flesh. He was enjoying this from the bottom of his heart and had relished in the sequence of blows they'd exchanged.

"Ooh... So you do have some skill. That would have finished off most people. I guess I need to use more than just the Anahata to fight you."

Ryoma cracked a smile, unappreciative of the count's backhanded compliment. Maybe the count was adopting a wait-and-see approach, but he hadn't unleashed the full extent of his capabilities quite yet. Still, that brief exchange was enough for Ryoma to see just how proficient his opponent was.

Three slashes in an instant... His speed, strength, technique—everything is above anyone I've fought so far. I wasn't doubting Helena's description of him, but he's just as skilled as she said he'd be.

From the moment Ryoma arrived in this world, he'd fought to the death many times, and of the numerous opponents he'd faced, only three had left a lasting impression—Kael Iruna, whom Ryoma had faced in the Rhoadserian civil war; Greg Moore, the O'ltormean knight whom he'd dueled during the expedition to Xarooda; and Vector Chronicle, whom he'd defeated recently in Viscount Bahenna's domain. All of them had been powerful martial thaumaturgy users, and all had had a strong heart backed by experience and pride as warriors. Each of them had boasted enough strength to be called a first-rate warrior.

Ryoma had also sparred with Chris Morgan in Pireas, Helena's protege and a skilled spearman with a thrust as fast as a god's. He was still a young warrior with much to improve upon, but his technique and talent made him one of the strongest warriors Ryoma had ever met.

Without a doubt, those four had been powerful, but as far as Ryoma could tell, their strength was no match for Count Salzberg. The count stood head and

shoulders above the rest in heart, technique, and body. And if what Count Salzberg had said was to be believed, he'd only used up to the Anahata chakra so far.

Based on the information I gained, the guild ranked Count Salzberg at Level 6, meaning he can use up to the Ajna chakra, located between the eyebrows.

The seventh chakra, the Sahasrara chakra, which was located at the top of the head, was said to be the same as the eyes on the palms of the thousand-armed Kannon. According to Buddhism, it was the very place where one reached enlightenment, and Taoism taught that reaching it would unlock endless wisdom. Using it wouldn't allow someone to exceed the limits of mankind—anything it did could still be explained as within the scope of what humans are capable of, but at the same time, unlocking it would make one almost superhuman.

The fact that Count Salzberg had unlocked Ajna, the sixth chakra, meant that he'd reached the height of human capability but hadn't crossed the threshold.

Ryoma honestly couldn't imagine what kind of power the count could unleash, but one thing was certain: Count Salzberg was the most powerful opponent Ryoma had faced thus far. Normally, a realization like that would have sent one running for the hills, but it loaded Ryoma's heart with fighting spirit.

I already knew this when I started this war. This just leaves...

With the Malfist sisters' help, Ryoma had unlocked the use of his own chakras. Before and during the expedition to Xarooda, he'd absorbed enough prana to unleash his third chakra, the Manipura chakra.

Ryoma was already very powerful by this world's standards, but compared to Count Salzberg, he was at a major disadvantage. If they were to clash directly, it would only be a matter of time before the count's blade cut his flesh. Be that as it may, Ryoma still had an ace up his sleeve.

In the end...it all comes down to whether this sword acknowledges me as its master.

Ryoma's gaze flicked to Kikoku, the sword he gripped in his hands. The Igasaki

clan's treasure was about to reveal its true potential, an accumulation of the five centuries it'd spent lying in wait.

Ryoma and Count Salzberg's shadows tangled together again. The sound of clashing steel and labored breathing filled Count Salzberg's office once more.

"Hmm, you hold your own even after I've used my fifth chakra. I'm not sure if you can really use the third chakra or if you're just pretending, but either way, it's impressive you've kept up with me this far."

Count Salzberg usually made backhanded compliments, but surprisingly enough, this was honest praise.

Fundamentally speaking, numbers, like how much prana one possessed and how many chakras one had unlocked, decided who was stronger between thaumaturgists. This was a general rule for all manner of thaumaturgy, be it martial, verbal, or endowed.

If prana could be likened to fuel, chakras were like engines. Naturally, more engines meant more proverbial horsepower, and more gasoline meant longer times between refilling. Of course, in motorsports, a discrepancy in the number of engines or the size of a fuel tank was considered cheating.

Choosing to fight with such a disadvantage would be nonsense, but there was no place for whining in a duel to the death.

Focus! Keep your eyes on the tip of his blade and block his attack!

Count Salzberg had already triggered his Vishuddha chakra—the fifth chakra located in his throat—but despite that, Ryoma had blocked his slashes and thrusts so far, much to the count's amazement.

"I sense a theoretical refinement in your swordsmanship, Baron Mikoshiba," Count Salzberg said. "The kind you wouldn't find in mercenaries who honed their skill on the battlefield. I don't know which school you studied under, but you were blessed with the tutelage of a fine teacher. I envy you. Does everyone in Rearth wield the sword like you do? I hear you were born in a country called Japan."

Ryoma forced a smile. He'd made no attempt to hide his origins, but he'd rather not hand out information unless he had to. Some details could flow

freely, but others were best kept secret.

That was one of the basic tenets for handling intelligence, a principle common across all worlds. Some things, like secrets regarding national defense, were withheld, while others, like announcements of new products, were intentionally spread on social media.

When it came to controlling information, its quality mattered the most, along with the when and to what extent it should be spread. In that regard, Ryoma wanted to keep detailed facts about himself hidden. The fact that he'd come from Japan was one particular detail he'd wanted to keep under wraps. After all, much like its cuisine, a country's geography and history tended to manifest in their martial arts.

For example, Brazil's martial art, capoeira, mostly focused on leg techniques because before Brazil abolished slavery, the people had to fight while handcuffed. And old-styled karate focused not on swords or spears, but on staffs and scythes. That was because the majority of its practitioners were commoners from the Ryukyu islands, where the royal family had outlawed more traditional weapons.

Not counting the validity of those historical records, history and geography tended to influence martial arts. Plus, one's country of origin also indicated their educational standards and ideology to an extent. Because of what others might glean from Ryoma's history, it would put him at risk if people knew where he was from, even in another world.

Count Salzberg is a terribly sadistic, extremely conceited man. If he believes he has the advantage, maybe...

Ryoma needed to find out where Count Salzberg had learned this. At worst, he would have to get the Igasaki clan to silence the source.

Holding back the urge to click his tongue, Ryoma casually said, "So you knew I was summoned from Japan."

"Of course I did. I looked into you, same as how you looked into me. I found out about it just before you came to me with the deal about the salt vein."

"Impressive... Well, it makes sense you did that."

In the modern world, it was normal to research your business partners and to expect them to do the same. However, in this medieval world, that kind of research and information exchange was unheard of, so it was highly unusual that Count Salzberg would have such a sense for handling intelligence.

I might have underestimated him. Not that I intended to, but I thought he was more of an adamant meathead.

Maybe the count's stingy, philandering attitude had clouded Ryoma's judgment, but of all the nobles Ryoma had met in this world, the count proved to be among the wisest, even in fields outside of combat. Count Salzberg understood what to reveal and what to keep under wraps, and he knew how to utilize that to his benefit. Even people in the modern age, who were more aware of information security, struggled with that.

"I see you have the same approach as me when it comes to intelligence," Count Salzberg said.

"Yes. They say that if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles."

"Some saying from Rearth, I suppose," Count Salzberg remarked, grinning. "Quite fitting, yet this continent is brimming with people who can't fathom something so basic. It's regrettable. However—"

Count Salzberg charged at Ryoma again. With a flurry of sparks, his sword skimmed past Ryoma's right cheek, cutting into it.

Ryoma felt an intense heat, like someone had pressed a smoldering iron to his face. The wound itself didn't look unusual at first, but it soon opened, the skin peeling off to reveal the vivid pink of Ryoma's flesh. That only lasted a moment, then red dots surfaced from the cut and trickled down his face and chest like a crimson stream.

Ryoma didn't feel any pain. The threat of death had sent adrenaline pumping into his veins, which had numbed him to it. The only thing that bothered him was the unpleasant wet sensation dripping from his face.

Ryoma's heart, full of surprise and praise, beat fast. He wasn't upset at Count Salzberg for the surprise attack, nor was he angry at himself for failing to block

the slash. True, attacking in the middle of a conversation would normally be seen as cowardly, but criticizing the count's actions would be utterly meaningless. One of the basics of combat was to use surprise attacks, underhanded tricks, and verbal warfare to shake and lure in the opponent. It was natural to employ these techniques and to expect the enemy to do the same.

After all, the two men facing off weren't engaged in a dance. They were fighting for their lives, and there was only one outcome: one lived and the other died.

Ryoma smirked, his cheek streaked in red. "I'm surprised. I didn't think you'd use shukuchi jutsu on me. I wasn't being careless, yet you landed a pretty heavy blow on me."

Though the bleeding had slowed a little due to the adrenaline pumping through his body, it hadn't stopped. Ryoma's cheek was still steadily oozing, which proved the cut was exceptionally deep.

"Oh, no, if anyone's surprised, it's me," Count Salzberg replied with a smile of his own. "You're a fine warrior. I can only recall a handful of warriors who could block an attack that strong and get away with a mere scratch. No matter how you look at it, my surprise attack worked perfectly, but I didn't expect you to praise me for it."

"Only sore losers spout excuses about cheating," Ryoma said, shrugging.

In sports, there were rules and regulations, but there were no battles to the death. Or rather, there could be, but then the rules would be pointless. Duels with witnesses had a set procedure, but when two people tried to kill one another, it was between them and no one else. They didn't implement guidelines before they fought, nor did they write them down to leave evidence.

If someone else were present, things would have been different, but it was just Ryoma and Count Salzberg in this room. Rules would have been useless. They only had power when there was a judge there to enforce them. As long as one feared the punishment from breaking them, they were merely a deterrent. The inability to keep to the rules was why war continued to rage across the world, even though mankind insisted it hated war.

In a duel like this one, not only was there no point in blaming the opponent for cowardice, but it would also make one lose their temper and dig their own grave. Ryoma knew this, so he had no intention of criticizing the count for his unscrupulous actions.

Count Salzberg must have really liked Ryoma's answer, because he laughed loudly. "Good, good! That's a truth you wouldn't hear from knights nowadays. They just prattle on about chivalry. I can't imagine a lad like you would understand that!"

"Well, most people seem to prefer chivalry, though," Ryoma replied.

"Yes, I've heard that caused you some trouble in the civil war."

Realizing who he was referring to, Ryoma flashed a sardonic smile. "Oh, don't get me started on *that*..."

In truth, Ryoma and Count Salzberg were cut from the same cloth; they could both become monsters of coldhearted rationality, commanders who would use any means—no matter how foul—to bend things in their favor. If it had been possible, Ryoma would have prioritized bringing Count Salzberg over to his side.

It's a shame, really. But we can't join forces at this point.

The intentions of countless people tangled together, forcing Ryoma to make Count Salzberg's death an absolute necessity. Ryoma might have been the leader of this army, but things were too far gone for him to change the plan on a whim.

But if the count can use shukuchi jutsu, that makes him a monster...

The attack Count Salzberg had used earlier was a special technique called shukuchi. It originated with Taoism, where immortal sages supposedly used it to warp from one point to another, but the word took on a different meaning when it was integrated into Japanese martial arts. By using quick, confusing steps, one could close the distance with their opponent and attack using the fewest movements possible.

It was considered one of the most complete martial arts techniques, a feat that required years of training and incorporated all three aspects of martial arts—heart, technique, and physique. Even Ryoma, despite being a young martial

arts prodigy, wasn't skilled enough to pull it off. In other words, Count Salzberg was a much more proficient warrior than Ryoma was.

"I guess I have no choice," Ryoma said, sighing. "I'll need to use my last resort."

"Oh, so you still have something up your sleeve!" Count Salzberg looked at Ryoma with a satisfied smile. "Now, this will be interesting."

"Yeah, I do...though I'd much rather not use it."

Ryoma tightened his hold on Kikoku's grip. He'd used this last resort once before at Kikoku's beckoning, edging toward superhuman martial feats. He had attained the power to easily dispatch even the most gigantic of monsters. However, this power was so great that handling it proved difficult. And power he couldn't properly control would eventually destroy him.

"Awaken, Kikoku, and feed on the grudges residing within you," Ryoma silently whispered.

As if to answer Ryoma's call, countless crimson sigils surfaced on Kikoku's blade. The sigils flickered repeatedly, like they were breathing, and before long, the whole blade shone red as blood.

Count Salzberg felt a terrifying chill run down his spine. *What is this...?!* A wave of terror, the likes of which he'd never felt before, even on the battlefield, washed over him. The air was pregnant with something more than fighting spirit or bloodlust. It was thick with the wind of death, a miasma that no living thing should ever emit. It could only be described as demonic.

Hearing the faint sound of clanging metal, Count Salzberg looked down at his hands.

I'm shaking... Am I really terrified by this?

Count Salzberg was among the strongest in this world. To an extent, even Queen Lupis fell short of him. The source of his power was his overwhelming strength and skill as an individual warrior.

As a count and the ruler of northern Rhoadseria, he was certainly powerful and influential. That was simply a secondary source of power, though. Ever

since he was young, he'd fought on the battlefield and slain countless people, as well as monsters in both his domain and the Wortenia Peninsula. Many opponents, counting in the tens of thousands, had died at his hand, and the power that those defeats had afforded him was overwhelming.

Because of his accumulated experience and all the prana he'd absorbed, his combat prowess exceeded even Rhoadseria's Ivory Goddess of War, Helena Steiner. Neither Mikhail Vanash, the strongest swordsman in Rhoadseria, nor Chris Morgan, an up-and-coming warrior hailed as the Godspear, could match him. If those two were to fight Count Salzberg, they'd only get in a few blows before the count killed them.

Count Salzberg boasted that much skill, but right now, the aura of death surrounding Ryoma overwhelmed him.

"I can't believe I'm being overpowered... That weapon, it's more than just an ordinary thaumaturgical sword. If it holds so much power, it must be a demonic or enchanted blade of some sort. But whether you can properly control it depends on your skill."

Count Salzberg glanced at the thaumaturgical sword passed down in his family and clicked his tongue.

Yes, this is a family heirloom, but it doesn't hold any special power. His sword is of a higher grade than mine. The endowed thaumaturgy does make my weapon sturdy, but if we clash, his sword will certainly cut through my blade.

Swords blessed with endowed thaumaturgy were called thaumaturgical swords. Weapons with a thaumaturgical seal fed on their wielder's prana to exhibit all sorts of effects. Swords and spears could become virtually unbreakable, and sharp blades would never go blunt. Those kinds of weapons were ideal and indispensable for warriors. Some weapons could use their seals to suck up the wind and billow flames. A weapon endowed with thaumaturgy elevated its wielder's skill.

Nonetheless, some weapons would inevitably be better than others, and not all thaumaturgical swords were made equal. Those with especially powerful effects were given unique titles, like holy swords, godly spears, demonic swords, and enchanted blades. Their powers were varied, but they had one

thing in common: whenever warriors wielded such weapons with enough skill to make use of them, they exhibited enough power to fell a gigantic monster with one strike.

“Fascinating. I felt this way when I first heard of you, but you truly are an interesting man!” Count Salzberg exclaimed, his ecstatic laughter echoing around the room.

He was relishing the way this battle was developing. Ever since he lost his knightly pride and his aristocratic dignity, his heart had thirsted for something. Not even years of extorting his subjects for taxes, bedding and toying with women, and feasting upon delicacies could satiate his thirst. He’d lived in constant restlessness for years, but now, at this moment, Count Salzberg’s heart was satisfied. He could only feel alive when he was dueling to the death.

“I’m sure you will sate my thirst,” Count Salzberg said, sheathing his sword and bending his knees.

Ryoma was familiar with this stance. “This posture... lai. How do you know that technique?” he asked, unable to hide his confusion.

“Yes, this technique hails from your world,” Count Salzberg remarked, smirking. “An art passed down in Rearth.”

His stance was perfectly executed, so it was clear he hadn’t just come up with it on the spot.

He’s totally ready to intercept me. Attacking now would just endanger me...

lai was a Japanese martial art that focused on unsheathing the blade while also slashing one’s opponent and then settling it back into the scabbard. An lai slash released from a perfect stance would be so swift that it would be beyond all perception.

In Ryoma’s eyes, the area in a three meter radius around Count Salzberg looked impenetrable. Carelessly crossing into it would just result in another wound.

There’s only one thing I can do...

Ryoma silently sheathed Kikoku and assumed the same stance as Count

Salzberg. He matched his perfect, impregnable territory with a sealed domain of his own. They both remained perfectly focused, their energies honed to a fine edge, as little by little they narrowed the ten meters between them.

How long did they remain this way? They couldn't tell. But suddenly, in the space of a second, their invisible domains touched ever so slightly.

A blade danced through the air, cutting into Ryoma from his right brow across his forehead. A second stream of blood, similar to the one on his cheek, gushed out and leaked down his jaw to his chest. It was obvious at a glance that the wound was deep.

However...the fight had already been decided.

"I thought I dodged it, but you were even more skilled than the rumors said. If it wasn't for Kikoku, I'd have lost. I should thank Gennou..."

Ryoma looked down at Count Salzberg, who lay sprawled on the floor, and breathed a sigh of relief. Both of their swings had intersected, each hoping to slay the other with a lethal move, but Ryoma Mikoshiba had emerged the victor—albeit by a very slim margin.

By using his trump card—Kikoku—Ryoma had matched the physical prowess of a warrior who'd unlocked the sixth Ajna chakra. The recoil of doing so had been heavy, though. Count Salzberg had been extraordinarily skilled. The way he'd breathed, the way he'd kept his distance, the way he'd shifted his weight—his every action had been smooth. He'd honed the skills he'd learned as a knight, elevating his swordsmanship to the highest level. Ryoma didn't know for sure how a man from this Earth could know battojutsu, but one thing was for certain: Count Salzberg's slash was equal to his grandfather Koichiro's attacks.

His deceased mother probably taught him.

In heart, mind, and body, Ryoma and Count Salzberg were equals. What had decided the victor, then?

I guess I was just more prepared.

Ryoma absolutely had to survive this battle. If he'd merely sat back and done nothing, Queen Lupis would have eventually eliminated him. To avoid that

outcome, he had to take control of Count Salzberg's domain and northern Rhoadseria. Ryoma had been backed against a wall, in a manner of speaking. Furthermore, his subordinates' lives were riding on his shoulders too, and that was a heavy weight even for Ryoma's stout heart.

What of Count Salzberg, then? If Ryoma had faced a younger Count Salzberg, perhaps the outcome would have been different, but the count now had turned his back on the world and become a foolish noble who drowned himself in riches and depravity.

A man who'd fought for his life had wielded one blade, while a noble who'd preferred material riches had swung the other. That single distinction had decided their fates. That difference had been very slim, however, and if they were to fight again, there was no telling who would win.

Not that there ever could be a second time.

Ryoma smirked to himself. He'd thought about something that really only applied to athletes. Not that he was looking down on athletes, but a sports match was nothing like a battle. Fights to the death were a one-time-only deal, but matches were basically dry runs for a real battle that *might* happen at some point.

One could lose every single practice bout and there'd be no consequences. Athletes could devote their entire lives to winning tournaments, approaching these events with passion and devotion, but if they lost, they could always enter the next tournament. Some athletes put an unbelievable amount of effort into meets, but none of them actually died when they lost. Retirement didn't cost them their futures as athletes either. In truth, no one match would threaten an athlete's life or career, even if the athletes or their fans might not admit it.

A duel to the death was much different. Very rarely, a fight between equally matched opponents might end in a draw, or a judge who bore witness might declare them equal. Sometimes, the participants would slay each other at the same time. Those situations seldom occurred, though, so duels almost always ended with one participant dead. There was no place for "what ifs," no point contemplating a different outcome. There were only two unchangeable

realities: either the body of your opponent lay dead before you, or your own lifeless shell fell to the ground.

Ryoma gazed at Count Salzberg's unmoving form for a long moment. He couldn't tell if it had been seconds or minutes, but at some point, a shadow stirred behind him—one of the Igasaki clan's ninjas.

"Milord..." the shadow said.

"What's the situation inside the castle?" Ryoma asked without turning around. He didn't need to check who it was. This castle was already under the control of the Igasaki ninjas and Dilphina's elite dark elf unit.

"Everything is going as planned. Thanks to Yulia Salzberg's assistance, we're progressing according to schedule."

"Good. What about Robert Bertrand?" Ryoma asked while pressing a piece of fabric he'd prepared ahead of time against his face.

"No issues to speak of. He's still under the influence of the drug and will probably sleep until noon."

"Very good. Treat him carefully, but also make sure to leave multiple guards with him at all times."

"Understood."

Ryoma saw Signus and Robert as a set of powerful pawns, and he absolutely wanted them on his side. He'd gone to great lengths to learn of Signus Galveria's sole weakness—his wet nurse Elmada—and he'd capture her unharmed, all to bring Signus to his side. Then, after Signus chose to surrender, Ryoma had told him to drug his best friend Robert, giving Signus no choice but to sell out Robert in order to prove he'd submitted to Ryoma.

"That just leaves suppressing the riots in the castle town," Ryoma said, gazing out the window.

They'd lit this fire, but they couldn't very well let it rage on. The citadel city of Epirus was now part of Ryoma Mikoshiba's domain, which went without saying at this point.

"Lady Lione has already made the preparations for that," the shadow replied.

“With Lady Yulia’s cooperation, it shouldn’t take long to suppress the riots. That is all I have to relay, milord.”

The shadow was probably eager to spread the news of Ryoma’s victory to their allies. Ryoma could feel a hint of excitement in the shadow’s voice.

Ryoma cracked a smile. “Fine, you can leave.”

The shadow bowed and melted into the darkness.

We’ve taken our first step.

It would depend on how others responded to this war’s outcome, but the ten houses of the north would likely lose much of their strength. That was the first step Ryoma referred to, but taking that step brought him closer to a showdown with an old enemy.

The question now is how Queen Lupis is going to respond to this. Will she resort to force, or...?

Strength decided everything in this world. It was a realm of endless carnage, where the strong devoured the weak, and the incredibly strong devoured them.

It’s like a poison curse...

A poison curse was a malediction said to originate in China. One would place poisonous insects in a jar, forcing them to fight and cannibalize one another until a single victor remained. Whether that curse actually had any effect, Ryoma saw this world as a poison curse’s jar. Right now, Ryoma—the strongest insect in Epirus’s jar—was preparing to slither into the larger jar of Rhoadseria. And once he consumed that jar, he intended to go even further.

But this just means I can’t back down.

Ryoma stood before Count Salzberg’s remains and brought his hands together in the only tribute he could offer to his fallen opponent.



Several days had passed since Ryoma Mikoshiba defeated Count Salzberg and took over Epirus.

Along Rhoadseria’s border, to the southwest of Epirus, stood the city of

Tristron. It had once flourished as one of the leading trade posts with Xarooda, and it had been known for its wealth and public order, second only to the capital itself.

“That’s a thing of the past by now,” Chris said.

Helena’s brows furrowed. She could understand the urge to complain, and Chris’s claim was correct, but her power and fame were the reasons Tristron could preserve its status quo. If she were to make an inappropriate remark about the city, there was no telling how things could fall apart. Thankfully, the only other person in the room was Chris, so this careless comment wouldn’t spread to the outside. Nevertheless, one could never be too careful, and refraining from making careless remarks to begin with was the safest thing they could do.

“I understand how you feel, Chris, but saying that here...” She trailed off, but her meaning was clear.

Helena sighed again and extended her hand to Chris, requesting the next document. She was constantly receiving reports, ranging from petitions by Tristron’s citizens to improve public safety to reinforcement requests from the guards on patrol. On top of that, the trade union that governed Tristron’s finances also sent her requests.

The result was the never-ending mountain of paperwork stacked before her—a major annoyance. It wasn’t that Helena thought she couldn’t handle it. She had experience governing occupied territories, so she was used to keeping the civilians of enemy countries under control. By comparison, governing her own country’s denizens wasn’t hard. But even though she could handle it, it didn’t change the fact that this was a burden that kept her working above and beyond her usual duties. Given the circumstances, no one would fault her for being displeased, and she much preferred to avoid any needless risks.

But if I do nothing, Tristron’s administration will be paralyzed, and we won’t be able to act if Xarooda requests aid.

Helena’s role in this city was to organize and dispatch a unit to Xarooda in case they sent another aid request. The O’ltormea Empire had withdrawn its troops from Xarooda for now, but it was obvious they would invade again soon.

Tristron didn't have a governor to begin with, so it was under the royal house's control. The capital would dispatch magistrates to manage such regions, so one might wonder why Helena was handling this paperwork and not the magistrate in charge of the city. The answer was that said magistrate simply didn't have the required governing skills.

It's no surprise no one bothered sending him any petitions.

Tristron was well known for being an unproblematic and uneventful city. A few decades ago, there had been constant fighting at the Xaroodian border, but things had since changed. In recent years, there'd been only a handful of times where it'd been necessary to mobilize the city's soldiers for something other than standard patrols. While there was a garrison of two hundred men in Tristron, there was hardly ever a need for them all.

This city had blossomed into a trade center a fair distance from the capital. It wasn't far enough away to be considered a backwater region, but it was far enough to be out from under the capital's watchful gaze. It was a perfect region to send poor, low-ranking nobles to serve as magistrates, but even if Tristron were left entirely alone, the merchant firms based in Tristron would work together to make the city overall profitable.

Things had changed since Helena arrived in the city, though. The recent civil war had left its mark on the land. As one might expect, a conflict that divided Rhoadseria's ruling class into two camps had had major repercussions, and both sides had exhausted their respective armies in the fighting.

This had harmed the country's productivity and public order. Nevertheless, in the time that had passed, one would expect that those wounds had begun to heal. The Battle of Heraklion had seen major losses, but for a war where soldiers clashed in the tens of thousands, the casualties were surprisingly slim.

That battle wasn't as impactful as I thought it would be.

Because Duke Gelhart had sworn fealty to Queen Lupis before the start of the battle, the siege of Heraklion had been much less damaging to the country than initially expected. They had only needed to sweep up the remnants of General Albrecht's knights' faction garrisoned in the city, thereby ending the war with minimal loss of life.

Unfortunately, what happened after the war—the expedition to Xarooda—had caused much more damage to the kingdom. Many farmers had been forced to neglect their fields, and refugees had started flooding both Rhoadseria’s cities and its rural areas. Consequently, public order took a turn for the worse, and the influx of refugees caused a sudden rise in bandit activities. Sadly, Tristron’s magistrate, Baron Yosef Stein, had lacked the capabilities to lead his domain through this problem. In fact, his skills, or lack thereof, had never even entered the equation because he’d locked himself up in his estate with his associates, claiming that he was stricken by illness. This had left Helena with just one choice, the result of which was the mountain of paperwork she had to contend with right now.

But I just need to wait a little longer, until the battle in Epirus ends. And then...

The other day, Count Zeleph had arrived at Helena’s doorstep for a secret discussion. What they’d talked about, no loyal subject to the queen should ever discuss, but they both knew that with the kingdom’s current state, they had to rebuild Rhoadseria from the ground up. For that reason, Helena continued putting pen to paper.

That night, slightly before the gates were scheduled to close, a runner arrived at Tristron, bearing news of Epirus’s fall. The story then traveled to Rhoadseria’s capital, Pireas, to the battlefield where countless schemes would clash and vie for supremacy.

Chapter 4: The House of Lords

“Your Majesty... Queen Lupis...”

Hearing a voice calling her name, Queen Lupis stirred and awakened from her slumber.

“Meltina?” she groggily murmured.

Meltina approached the queen’s bed. “My apologies for disturbing your slumber, Your Majesty,” she said, her familiar voice laced with dread and shock, “but I have urgent news, so I insisted that the guards let me in.”

Meltina’s strained tone immediately jolted Queen Lupis awake.

“I see. Very well.”

It’s dark, Queen Lupis thought as she sat up and glanced at the sky between the window’s curtains. She then looked at the marionette clock on the wall, confirming that it was around 2 a.m. *It’s only been an hour since I got in bed.*

It hadn’t been long since Queen Lupis had finished her duties for the day and gone to bed. Normally, she’d be asleep for another five hours, after which one of her attendants would come to wake her up. These few hours of sleep were her only respite from the long days full of duties. Everyone serving her realized this and knew better than to disturb her while she slept, but something urgent enough to justify waking her from what little rest she got had happened.

“Well?” Queen Lupis tersely prompted, her tone understandably grim. She still wasn’t fully awake, and she could very much use a cup of strong tea, but the moment she heard Meltina speak, her bad mood became the last thing on her mind.

“Our spies in the north have just contacted us,” Meltina said gravely. “They report that Epirus has fallen into that man’s hands.”

Queen Lupis swallowed nervously. She didn’t even need to ask which man Meltina was talking about. Only one person in Rhoadseria was poised to take

over Epirus.

“Meltina, are you sure?” Queen Lupis asked, only realizing her voice was shaking after the words left her lips.

This had to be true. Meltina Lecter wouldn't have barged into her liege's bedroom in the dead of night if she wasn't sure. If there was the slightest possibility of it being a lie, Meltina wouldn't have dared wake her like this. But though Queen Lupis knew this, her heart couldn't accept the truth so easily.

Meltina nodded, looking crestfallen. “Yes, I'm afraid so...”



“I...see.” Queen Lupis sighed heavily. “We were prepared for this, but I didn’t think he’d really triumph over the ten houses of the north.”

Only a month ago had Queen Lupis received news of Ryoma’s attack on the ten houses of the north.

Later reports spoke of refugees from the ten houses’ domains forcibly evacuating to Epirus, so I suspected he intended to cut off their supply chain and carry out a prolonged siege, but I didn’t think he’d make his move this quickly.

If Ryoma had tried to win the war through a prolonged siege, it would’ve given her time to maneuver and implement countermeasures against him, but now those plans had gone down the drain.

That terrible man. Why does he always do things I never expect?

When Ryoma was on her side, she’d been mostly taken aback but also delighted by his achievements. However, now that he was her rival, she couldn’t regard his actions as pleasant surprises.

“What of Count Salzberg, and the other heads of the ten houses who came to Epirus to help him? Are they alive?” Queen Lupis asked.

Meltina hesitated.

It looks like she really doesn’t want to answer that.

Queen Lupis could tell by Meltina’s expression that she was bearing bad news. Still, Meltina had to say something or else things wouldn’t move on.

“Meltina?” Queen Lupis said, urging her to answer.

“Well... Based on the report, Count Salzberg and the majority of the heads of the ten houses have either perished or their whereabouts are unknown. We’ve also lost contact with their families, who had been moving from their domains to Epirus as well.”

Queen Lupis could practically feel all the color drain from her face.

He killed Count Salzberg? That’s a problem in and of itself, but did he really harm the heads of the ten houses and their families?

Given the size of Count Salzberg’s army, and the ten houses’ armies united

under him, they should have outnumbered Ryoma's forces 8 to 2, or maybe 7 to 3. Needless to say, Count Salzberg had had an overwhelming advantage.

On the other hand, considering that the Wortenia Peninsula was such a difficult domain to govern and that Ryoma had only governed it for a few years, the fact that he'd raised an army only four times smaller than Count Salzberg's was rather startling. No one would've believed it was anything but an overestimation. This was proof that while Queen Lupis and her aides had taken Ryoma seriously, he had exceeded their expectations.

"Are you saying they got caught up in the chaos of his attack on Epirus?" Queen Lupis asked.

Meltina shook her head. "I'm afraid that we don't know much about that yet, but..."

The information that Meltina's spies in northern Rhoadseria had delivered was fragmentary at best, so even though they could determine who won the battle, they didn't have the minute details. This wasn't uncommon in wars, and there was still a chance that some had successfully escaped Epirus. Sadly, in all likelihood, very few of them had gotten away.

Meltina continued, knowing what she was about to say would shock her mistress. "We've only been able to confirm the survival of three people, namely Count Salzberg's wife, Lady Yulia, and Count Salzberg's Twin Blades, Signus Galveria and Robert Bertrand."

Queen Lupis looked up at the ceiling. She'd guessed why those three in particular had survived.

Lady Yulia and the Twin Blades? If that's true, then he must have wanted them to live...

Since those three had survived by Ryoma's will, those whose status was still unknown had almost certainly perished.

Meltina was speechless as she watched her queen react.

I accounted for the possibility that he would overcome Count Salzberg, and I was prepared for a great deal of bloodshed if he did, but...I didn't expect this much, Meltina thought, realizing that despite her caution, her predictions had

been wrong.

Unfortunately, Meltina had further news to report to Queen Lupis, including the fact that Baron Vector Chronicle had gone missing soon after Meltina had sent him to mediate the war. If she were to tell that to the queen now, it would be too much of a blow to her liege's gentle heart, yet Meltina couldn't not inform Queen Lupis of this.

He went missing, eh?

It was such a convenient turn of phrase. Meltina was disgusted with herself for using it to describe the situation. It wasn't incorrect, since they really didn't know where Vector was right now, but it carried the implication that he might still be alive. The phrase meant that they'd lost contact with him and didn't know his current whereabouts, but it didn't clarify if he was alive or dead. Just because there wasn't a body, it didn't mean they could hold onto hope that he might still be alive.

It was wishful thinking, and even Meltina recognized that, so she was fairly convinced that Vector hadn't survived. The letter she'd received just a few days ago from Vector contained his thanks for being granted this duty and a fervent promise that he would fight Ryoma Mikoshiba and take Ryoma's life, even if it resulted in his own death. He'd also worded himself in a way that suggested if he should fall, they ought to put the fact that Ryoma had killed the queen's messenger—albeit an unofficial one—to good use.

When she'd read his letters, Meltina had wept. She'd realized just how shallow and foolish her plan had been. And since Vector had written with such passion, his disappearance meant that there was absolutely no chance he'd survived his mission. The die had already been cast. All that remained was the question of how they were to take advantage of this situation.



On that day, a veritable tremor ran through Rhoadseria's royal palace.

The sky outside the castle windows was a vast azure expanse, no clouds in sight. A pleasant breeze blew across the land as warm sunlight shone down. It was the very definition of fine weather, but the steps of the people walking through Pireas's streets sounded melancholic. The same held true for the

nobles, the knights on patrol, the court ladies, and the palace's attendants.

As a heavy air hung over the city, a group of women dressed as court ladies sat in a secluded room in the corner of the palace.

"I see everyone is accounted for?" one woman asked, glancing around. The other women all quickly nodded.

This woman, the apparent leader of the group, was Charlotte Halcyon. Her lush blonde hair was elegantly arranged, and her ice-blue eyes were quite distinctive. She was certainly a beautiful woman, and just about any man would be drawn to her looks. Yet that was solely based on appearances and grooming. If asked whether they wanted to spend a night with her or take her as their wife, those same men would likely refuse. Of course, some foolhardy men perhaps wouldn't mind a night of inconsequential fun with her, but most men would reject that idea.

Although Charlotte was in her twenties, beyond the prime age for marriage as far as noble ladies went, she was neither engaged nor rumored to be in any sort of romantic relationship. There were two reasons for this. The first was Charlotte's family. She was by no means lowborn—quite the contrary. Her status was so high that it was a problem. Her father was Marquis Arthur Halcyon, leader of Rhoadseria's House of Lords and a high-ranking member of Viscount Gelhart's nobles' faction, a faction which still had significant influence on the country. Since Charlotte was born to such a lofty status, her chosen mate would have to be of similar rank. The title of marquis was one of the highest-ranking noble titles in Rhoadseria, so this narrowed down the list of candidates.

The second reason Charlotte remained single was that she was of royal blood, a result of the royal family's past attempts to win over the country's most influential nobles. Needless to say, Charlotte took great pride in the knowledge that royal blood ran through her veins, though that knowledge was a double-edged blade. Despite her blood ties, Charlotte would never inherit sovereignty. Her claim to the throne was extremely weak, and that fact alone made it difficult to find her a worthy groom.

With those two issues compounded together, the difficulties became all the worse. If nothing else, her betrothed couldn't be some derelict second or third

son without a fortune to their name. Charlotte had no male siblings either, so her potential groom would become the heir apparent to the title of Marquis Halcyon. Because of this, she couldn't marry into another house. Doing so would force her to leave behind her maiden home and become part of her husband's house instead. Strictly speaking, her groom would have to marry into her family.

Charlotte could lower her standards, in which case there would be more possible candidates, but they were, for the most part, second or third sons of barons or viscounts—men not worthy enough to carry on the Halcyon name. Whoever wed Charlotte would need to be of a pedigree deserving of House Halcyon.

The only solution left was to look to a royal or a high-ranking noble from another country. When influential nobles of the same country married only among themselves, their blood grew too thick, making it harder for different nobles to coordinate their vested interests. For this reason, marrying outside the country was probably the safest choice.

But the goddess of fate refused to smile on Charlotte. The antagonism between the nobles and the royal family over the last ten or so years had continually caused her problems. The deceased King Pharst II felt pressured by the nobles' rising influence and desperately sought to regain sovereignty over the country. His heir, Queen Lupis, tried to do the same. Though Queen Lupis seemed calm at the moment due to diplomatic factors, the turbulence from the past few years probably made her unwilling to accept a Rhoadserian noble marrying an influential aristocrat from another country. She could claim the groom was a spy, or insist that they were trying to take over Charlotte's family.

This problem wasn't exclusive to Charlotte either. While Marquis Halcyon and his family were promising nobles within Rhoadseria, they weren't unique or irreplaceable. There were several other nobles that equaled them in rank and influence, yet most of their daughters had already found grooms. Some of them were ten years younger than Charlotte, and some had children already.

For all that, the main reason Charlotte wasn't married was because of her overbearing, intimidating attitude. After all, she'd lived in the palace up until her teens, surviving the power struggles that raged there. As a court lady, she

managed Queen Lupis's female attendants. True, she didn't have any administrative power, but though she wasn't in a position to directly nominate ministers or generals, she did have authority over the cooks who fed the king and the maids who waited on the bureaucrats, and that was enough to give her a strong footing in the court. And since she was in a position to speak to the sovereign directly, this gave her the freedom to whisper false charges and slander in their ear.

Of course, saying such dangerous things was risky. If she were too obvious about her lies, the sovereign would lose trust in her, perhaps even have her beheaded for her actions. This was why Charlotte had never criticized or bad-mouthed anyone in front of Queen Lupis. Even if the queen were to prompt her to criticize someone, Charlotte would merely remain silent and smile.

It wasn't that Charlotte couldn't criticize anyone; she simply didn't want to. Everyone else knew this too. She was like a nuclear weapon with a safety on it. That was the influence afforded to those who served the king and the royal family.

Charlotte understood all too well the cruelties of a power struggle, so she kept herself sternly in check. She only ever used her authority after a great deal of careful deliberation. She cautiously spun her plots and delivered blows that would utterly defeat her opponents. Her decision to be that way was a wise one, and she'd earned her position through effort and prudence.

One could favorably describe Charlotte as sagacious, or more negatively as sly, but her manner of speech offered a glimpse of her strong will. This was why, despite her fine pedigree and well-groomed appearance, she'd remained unwed for so long. But Charlotte didn't bemoan her fate. She knew that maintaining her position within the court was the best thing she could do as a member of House Halcyon.

This is why my presence here is important.

The night prior, a messenger riding on a fast horse had arrived at the capital with news of the northern rebellion's conclusion—news that quickly spread through the palace. The court was a battlefield where one fought with information, finances, and authority rather than weapons. Any nobleman—

assuming they weren't petty bureaucrats who didn't care who was in charge or fools who didn't know their place—was wise enough to realize that they had to keep their ears peeled if they were to survive. Or rather, only nobles who were smart enough to realize that survived in the court.

Soon after the news had reached the palace, Charlotte had been informed of it too. What was most important to her now was to decide her future course of action and begin making preparations for it. In other words, Charlotte and the other women gathered here weren't simple attendants or court ladies.

“Good, then since our time is short, let us cut to the chase, shall we? I assume you've all heard what happened, yes?” Charlotte asked.

Everyone nodded again. There was no need to elaborate on what she was referring to, and if anyone were foolish enough to ask, Charlotte would have no doubt ostracized and expelled them from the group. Thankfully, she didn't need to do that.

Of course they know.

Charlotte nodded, satisfied.

It was late in the afternoon and past the royals' lunchtime, a convenient time for the court ladies and attendants. But it was still daytime, so they were all on-duty and couldn't be away from their appointed posts for long, mainly because their constant proximity to their masters was why they were so privy to their secrets. Charlotte had only gathered them here because the matter was that urgent, and only one matter could prompt her to do this. Any woman who didn't know this was certainly lacking skills in gathering intel. And if anyone was that incompetent, associating with them or their families was nothing but a liability.

These women had been dispatched to the palace at their families' behest. They were all noble daughters and ladies, but they weren't there to display their families' loyalty to the royal house. They were there to learn appropriate manners and form connections. They basically functioned as a cross between a maid and court lady. They had other important reasons for going to the palace, though. One was to gather news, and the other was to serve as diplomats who helped coordinate the different noble families' vested interests.

All of these ladies were currently most interested in handling a number of

matters that had cropped up as a result of the northern rebellion. Normally, this wouldn't call for much concern, since private wars between nobles were outlawed in Rhoadseria. Attacking and wiping out another house was an act punishable by death, but in most cases, it was resolved by a demotion in one's noble class, confiscation of one's land, or mandatory financial reparations. But the problem was that, this time, the man who'd instigated this private war was Ryoma Mikoshiba.

Since Ryoma was an upstart who'd been promoted from commoner status, most nobles disliked him. But since Queen Lupis was the one who'd granted Ryoma his title, no one could openly dispute his legitimacy. Moreover, his contributions during O'ltormea's invasion of Xarooda were so remarkable that they couldn't be ignored. So while the nobles loathed Ryoma, the ladies present were under the impression that recklessly recommending he be put to death might incur Queen Lupis's ire. Therefore, they all kept their mouths shut.

The first to speak was Bettina Eisenbach, daughter of House Eisenbach, a noble family that was second to House Halcyon in prestige.

"News that the upstart slew Count Salzberg is bound to spread to all the country's nobles before long," she said with a morose expression.

She had a plump chest, a curvy waist, an oval face, and blonde hair. She had an odd sort of charm that seemed to naturally attract men. She was certainly Charlotte's equal in terms of looks. Her moist eyes looked like they might overflow at any second, and the sight of her weeping would make any man rush to her aid—unaware that this was all part of Bettina's trick.

Bettina's voice and expression had seemed quite sorrowful, but all she'd done was state the facts. She'd said nothing of actual substance, and her entire intention had been just to get a reaction out of everyone else. Still, everyone here knew of Bettina's methods, and none of them fell for her act. For better or worse, all the women present were similar to her. All the same, none of them actually said that to her face. They merely pretended to be fooled. But placating each other like this wouldn't progress the conversation, so Charlotte willingly responded to Bettina's prodding.

"It's quite the heartbreaking affair, I'd say," Charlotte said, hanging her head

sadly. “The rumor mill has been quite active as of late. However, House Salzberg has governed the north since before Rhoadseria’s founding, and it has been charged with the northern border’s defense since the kingdom was established. They’re a prestigious warrior house. To think that they could fall like this...”

Realizing what Charlotte was hinting at, Diana Hamilton—the daughter of Count Hamilton—said, “In that case...what of Count Salzberg’s successor?”

“I’m only aware of what my family has told me, but it seems he does not have an heir,” Charlotte answered. “Meaning that, assuming no one crawls out of the woodwork claiming they’re the count’s heir, the headship and title will go to his bereaved wife, Lady Yulia. Of course, given the deceased count’s...proclivities, it’s possible there’s some child we’re not aware of. Or maybe his distant relatives will make a claim to the title. Either way, I doubt Lady Yulia will simply accept that kind of interference. At worst, this could mean...”

“Another war?” Diana finished.

Charlotte nodded gravely. “Yes, though I dread to think of it.”

The other women all sighed woefully. Or, at least, it sounded like woe, but truthfully it was closer to reproachful scorn.

“So...you’re saying Lady Yulia will inherit the count’s title?” Diana asked.

“Yes,” Charlotte replied. “There were cases in the past where, in the absence of an heir, the legal wife took the title. However, that kind of arrangement is frowned upon.”

Women inheriting a noble title wasn’t entirely unheard of in this world. Sometimes, a legitimate heir was named prior to the title holder’s death, but there had been many instances where a noble died in battle and the legitimate heir was too young to succeed the title. In such cases, the noble lady had been granted the title until the child reached maturity.

This was a necessary precaution, since such states of emergency were extremely unstable and volatile. For example, a noble house might be in urgent need of an heir, but its members were quarreling about who would be the worthiest successor. While they did, an enemy might attack the domain in its time of weakness. Allowing this to happen would be the height of folly, but

right now, Count Salzberg's domain was practically helpless—appetizing prey for his opponents.

Now that Count Salzberg is dead, someone must inherit his place, or some self-styled successor will wipe out his relatives. Everyone knows it, but no one is going to support Lady Yulia's claim to the title.

Charlotte internally sneered as she looked at everyone's displeased expressions. She could see in their faces the animosity they harbored for Lady Yulia.

The rumors do paint her as a vile woman, after all. She's talented enough, but no one would accept a merchant's daughter. Although, it's doubtful how many of them would vocally acknowledge their dislike.

Charlotte could tell that none of the women here were willing to share their true thoughts. The most they did was let their displeasure show on their faces, and perhaps even that was merely a calculated facade to maintain their families' interests.

"But at present," Charlotte continued, "there isn't anyone who can prevent her from claiming the title."

"Yes, that's right. Nevertheless, considering the upstart's methods so far, one must wonder why he spared Lady Yulia," Diana noted.

Charlotte couldn't understand it either. As far as she knew, Ryoma Mikoshiba was a merciless man, the kind who would drown countless soldiers in a flood, like during the last civil war. In this latest war, he'd attacked the ten houses' domains, cut off their line of supply, and forced the refugees to overrun Epirus—foul tactics, indeed. He was nothing short of a callous demon.

If he's that kind of man, why would he let Lady Yulia live?

Charlotte had pondered this question numerous times already, but she was no closer to the answer than when she started. Besides, there were other, more pressing issues to consider right now.

Having judged this an opportune time to broach the subject, Charlotte moved on to the topic Queen Lupis had asked her to handle.

“The question of who succeeds Count Salzberg will be answered soon enough. For now, we must consider how to respond to this war.”



The other women's expressions instantly changed. All were keen enough to realize the significance of Charlotte's statement, the real reason they were gathered here.

"Are you, in other words, asking us how the House of Lords should respond to this war?" Bettina asked.

Charlotte nodded silently, and the other women exchanged weary looks. They understood what Charlotte was asking of them, but her request meant they'd have to brave considerable risks.

A long, uncomfortable silence overtook the group until Diana finally grew impatient and asked, "Is this what Her Majesty asks that we do?"

Charlotte had been hoping that they would ask this question, so her answer was prompt and concise.

"Yes, precisely. Soon after Meltina explained the situation to Her Majesty, the queen called for me and personally asked me to do this."

Everyone sighed, understanding the implicit meaning behind what Charlotte had just said.

The House of Lords wanted nothing more than to judge and punish Baron Mikoshiba for his transgressions, but they couldn't openly do that. Instead, they were tiptoeing around the question of who would succeed Count Salzberg, hoping that they could get to Ryoma somehow through that. Their only hesitation was the queen's opinion on the matter, but that was already a foregone conclusion. As powerful as the House of Lords was within Rhoadseria, going against the ruler's wishes required a great deal of courage.

Had this been about some traditional noble house with relatives in other aristocratic families, some of the other nobles might have disapproved of what the House of Lords wanted to do, but this was about eliminating the upstart noble, the thorn in everyone's side. Moreover, involving themselves in this wouldn't put Diana or Bettina at a disadvantage. On the contrary, they only stood to gain Queen Lupis's favor for taking part.

"I see. Very well," Bettina said, rising from her seat. "In that case, House Eisenbach does not object to the proposal. I will tell father as such."

The other noble ladies soon followed her example and declared they would agree to act upon Queen Lupis's request to pass judgment on the Mikoshiba barony. With this, the sanctions on the barony were decided.

That night, Charlotte visited Queen Lupis's bedroom to report the outcome of her discussion with the other noble ladies. Queen Lupis listened patiently to Charlotte's account, the moonlight illuminating the slightly gloomy smile that played on her lips.

"Good. Thank you," she told Charlotte.

Queen Lupis sounded exhausted, and Charlotte could feel a certain pain in her voice, proof that the queen was racked with conflicting emotions. Although the cause for her anguish was quite clear, Charlotte could do little to help her.

Still as kind as ever, Charlotte thought.

Charlotte couldn't help feeling exasperated with Queen Lupis. The queen had gotten the outcome she wanted, and yet she couldn't rejoice. Charlotte would never voice her exasperation, though.

She was never suited to be queen in the first place.

In Charlotte's eyes, a ruler needed to be decisive and ruthless, two traits Lupis Rhoadserians lacked.

Once upon a time, even Charlotte Halcyon—infamously known within the court as the Frosty-Eyed One—had admired the title of princess, innocently believing that some day a charming prince would swoop into her life and whisk her away. Of course, the heroines of such stories typically ran into unfortunate circumstances. In one story she'd heard, a traitor killed the protagonist's father, forcing the family to wander their stolen country in an attempt to regain it. In another story, a girl's mother died in childbirth and her father remarried, but his vile new wife and her daughters tormented her. There was even a story about a princess who had to wed a centuries-old evil dragon in order to protect her people.

Charlotte had heard all of these tales from her wet nurse, and the wet nurse had only told her the synopses and outlined the tragedies, but for the most

part, they concluded happily with brave, dashing princes saving their heroines. The banished princess, the girl abused by her stepmother—they both ran into a brave hero who rescued them from their plights.

There were some stories where the main characters met terrible ends, but the protagonist was usually some sort of dark hero who fought for vengeance and took justice into their own hands. Whether one liked such tragic works was a matter of taste, but they certainly weren't the kind loved by the majority, to say nothing of their appropriateness for children. Even if it was a double standard, people tended to prefer happy endings.

But by now, the story of that vile dragon almost feels like a masterpiece to me.

Charlotte thought back to how she'd pestered her wet nurse into telling her that story time and again, of how a terrible evil dragon awakened to pure love, returned to his true form of a human man, and ruled the kingdom with the princess. It ended well because the vile dragon was actually a young man cursed to live in draconic form, but it did beg the question of how he remained a young man when the curse was lifted. A dragon could live for centuries, and this one was described as old, so once the curse was lifted, his human body should have experienced all that accumulated time.

That kind of tragic twist offered no solace to anyone, but had Charlotte been the one casting the curse, she would have made sure that it worked that way. Curses were born of grudges, of a desire to torment an enemy, and the best way to torture someone was to wait until they started believing in hope and then snatch it away.

From the moment the dragon turned out to be a human, the story had already been cheapened. It was obviously done so he'd be an appropriate age to wed the princess. It did come across as a natural conclusion of the story's feel and flow, and a happy ending where the curse was lifted and the power of love saved the prince's life felt fitting, but it wasn't realistic. The dragon could have just as well been an infant or an old man on his final days before he was cursed. Perhaps he simply took on the form of a young man to suit the princess's tastes.

The story of the exiled princess was just as unrealistic as the dragon one.

It would have made more sense if she'd been caught and executed soon after the traitor usurped the throne. Or maybe she should have been forced to marry the usurper, her parents' killer, in order to solidify the traitor's reign.

Stories with outcomes like that were realistic; similar situations had happened plenty of times in this world. The diary of House Halcyon's first head included several stories that Rhoadseria would wish to keep secret. One of them was of Rhoadseria's first king, whose wife was the princess of a rival country that ruled over the continent's east at the time.

The fairytale of the beautiful girl tormented by her stepmother was lacking in realism too. It made no sense that the heroine wouldn't harbor any grudges for how she was treated. It would be natural if she were to seek revenge. It was even probable that at some point she would just snap, pick up a carving knife, and slay her stepmother and stepsisters. It was certainly a dismal and unsatisfying outcome, but it was a reasonable one, much more likely to happen in this world.

But none of the tales Charlotte's wet nurse had told her ended so tragically, and she'd only read them so that she could tuck Charlotte in bed. Realistic, unembellished stories were fuel for nightmares, and fairy tales weren't just for amusement and escapism, but also for teaching morals and lessons. Besides, with the bleak reality of this world, there was little need to include it in a story as well. Why make up tales when one could easily recount a tragedy that had actually taken place?

For that reason, most stories were convenient fantasies. But when a child heard them time and again, they would become the same as reality, and imagining the people in their lives as such characters came naturally to them. It was similar to how a child might be torn between believing the one who delivered their Christmas presents was Santa Claus or their own parents. It was a naivete one could maintain only for a short period of time. Dreams inevitably came to an end. The question was when that day would come.

In my case, it came early.

There were plenty of women in Charlotte's age group who were still, to some extent, living on that line between innocent dreams and bitter reality. Many

noble ladies received an excellent education, but despite their intellect and cultivation, they were arrogant and insolent. They were adult women with matured bodies, but they were still extremely emotional, and they threw tantrums when things didn't go their way.

The worst part was that the mistress Charlotte served was one of these women. The same could not be said of Charlotte Halcyon, however. She had the authority of House Halcyon, but she never allowed herself to be a powerless maiden driven by fantasies.

Queen Lupis has been through quite a bit of heartache since the civil war, and she's improved somewhat, but her inexperience really does show when it comes to things like this.

Her mistress needed only to state her wishes for them to be granted, but it required a great deal of time and effort behind the scenes to make her demands a reality. Charlotte handled much of that work, so when the queen asked her to make the necessary preparations, all while racked with guilt, Charlotte had to wonder what Queen Lupis was thinking.

It's the same for this entire incident, really. I can relate to her fearing him, but she could handle herself better. My future is on the line here too.

With those emotions in her heart, Charlotte Halcyon gazed at Queen Lupis Rhoadserians, the greatest gesture of friendship she could offer her sovereign.

Epilogue

A month had passed since the series of battles between Count Salzberg and Ryoma Mikoshiba—what the history books would call the Northern Upheaval—ended with Ryoma’s victory.

In a room at the Red Star Pavilion, a high-class inn located in Pireas and run by Pireas’s guild branch, two men sat facing each other. One of them was Jacob Roland, an elderly man dressed in decorated priestly garb. He was a cardinal in the Church of Meneos. Akitake Sudou, a middle-aged man with neatly combed hair, sat opposite of him.

Normally, no one would ever picture these two men in the same room. Cardinal Roland rarely left the holy city of Menestia, and even if he did, his status was far above Sudou’s. Wherever the cardinal went, soldiers always guarded him from nearby.

A cardinal was an advisor to the pope, the man holding the highest authority within the church. If the pope ever abdicated for whatever reason, the cardinals would convene to choose his replacement. They weren’t nobles, yet they were even more powerful than the aristocracy.

Given Cardinal Roland’s high station, the gap between him and Sudou was substantial. No one would assume they were acquaintances, but looking at them now, it was clear they were familiar with each other and had known each other for some time. That said, anyone listening in on this conversation would likely balk at such an awful exchange. The topic—bloodshed—was totally unfit for a clergyman.

As they jauntily chatted and joked about, Sudou brought out a bottle of Qwiltantian wine. “I’ve heard of the incident in Galatia, though. Terrible business,” he said, his expression apologetic as he poured wine into Cardinal Roland’s cup.



“Oh, you have no idea,” the cardinal replied. His face clouded over as he gulped his drink like he was trying to wash down some unpleasantness. “I never expected that Count Winzer would be assassinated and that we would be suspected of planning the affair. And that’s even after we suffered our own considerable losses. They say this is all some kind of farce we’ve concocted.”

The cardinal heaved a sigh and continued.

“It’s truly a foolish affair, but I suppose it was unavoidable, given that the officials of this country are heretics who don’t adhere to the faith. I should regard them as I would an ignorant dog.”

Cardinal Roland, usually the very image of irreproachable conduct, spoke in an unusually derisive manner. If Menea or Rodney were to see him now, they wouldn’t believe their eyes. His behavior could call his legitimacy as a clergyman into question. Sudou, on the other hand, didn’t seem at all surprised. The cardinal’s change of attitude couldn’t shake their relationship, it seemed.

“Yes, I’d imagine so. The church’s influence on this country is fairly weak,” Sudou said and then directed an inquisitive look at Cardinal Roland. “And I must admit that the fact you visited Count Winzer’s estate on the night of his assassination, of all times, does seem a bit suspicious.”

As a high-ranking member of the Organization, Sudou was well aware of the tragedy that had taken place in Galatia. Maybe he knew more about it than even Cardinal Roland did. Naturally, he knew that the suspicions toward the church’s delegation were misplaced. However, Sudou only knew all this because he was a member of the Organization. Were he simply an unrelated man who’d heard rumors of the tragedy, he would probably suspect that the church was involved with the assassination.

I do feel bad for doing this, Sudou thought.

He knew his implication was nothing short of slander, but not even he felt comfortable saying something that might expose his involvement in the affair. Nevertheless, Cardinal Roland couldn’t hear Sudou’s silent apology.

“You think we were pulling the strings then, Sir Sudou?” the cardinal asked, shocked. From his perspective, an old friend had just suspected him of murder.

Sudou merely laughed off the cardinal's reproachful gaze. "I could never suspect you, Cardinal. I'm merely relaying what the public seems to think. Besides, I've heard that one of the Temple Knights' most promising captains, Rodney Mackenna, was severely injured and lost his right arm. If this were all a farce you cooked up, I doubt you would maim one of your men to maintain it. Or is the report about him losing an arm a baseless rumor?"

Sudou's reply was a backhanded one, to say the least. It implied that though some of the Church of Meneos's strongest knights had been present, not only did they fail to stop the assassination, but one of them even lost his arm in the process. No matter how one spun it, it was embarrassing for the church. Indeed, as soon as Sudou brought it up, Cardinal Roland's expression visibly darkened. It was enough for Sudou to infer the predicament Rodney and his troops were in. They were probably being heavily criticized for what had happened.

It's only natural. If one of their finest men lost his arm to some unknown assassin, the church's influence would surely plummet.

Sudou knew of Koichiro Mikoshiba, from the tales of his military service down to his impressive skill, so the news that Rodney had lost an arm to Koichiro didn't come as a surprise. Rodney was very skilled, but the guild ranked him at Level 6, a warrior who could only use up to the Ajna chakra located in the throat. By comparison, Koichiro Mikoshiba was an ascendant, a master of thaumaturgy who had reached the limits of human capability. If Koichiro were to be down to his last resort, he could surpass even those boundaries and become a transcendent. The idea of a human facing a monster like him head-on was nonsense.

Rodney is strong, but a mere human can only achieve so much. How many warriors alive on this continent could possibly hope to measure up to that man?

If one were to search both the church and the Organization, they could perhaps find one or two warriors capable of facing Koichiro Mikoshiba. But again, Sudou only knew this because he was familiar with Koichiro's strength. Cardinal Roland knew nothing of this.

"No, as painful as it is to admit, the rumors of Rodney losing his arm are true,"

the cardinal answered sadly. “That shadow that slew Count Winzer effortlessly cut it off.”

“Shadow?” Sudou asked.

“Yes, and it very nearly took my life too. Well, it wasn’t a shadow per se. It was some armored figure wearing a black mask, but he truly was like a shadow. He was there, and I could see him, but I didn’t feel him. It was like he had no presence at all.”

Cardinal Roland paused, pouring more wine into his glass before continuing.

“And it seems Menea and her troops were also injured while facing another shadow wielding a spear. They weren’t hurt to the same extent as Rodney, but they did need nostrums to recover.”

Sudou nodded. “I see, I see. That sounds terrible. But those shadows must be rather skilled if they can match and overcome two of the Temple Knights’ most promising commanders.”

“Yes, someone that skilled couldn’t possibly be some unknown person. The church is trying its best to find out about them, but it looks like their efforts are coming up short.”

Cardinal Roland took another sip from his glass, a frustrated expression on his face. He clearly didn’t want to linger on this, so he clammed up and focused on sipping his wine.

A long moment of silence passed until Sudou smoothly changed the topic.

“I suppose if you don’t know, there isn’t much to be done. Let’s get to the main point then, shall we?”

“And what’s that?” Cardinal Roland asked. He was visibly confused.

“It’s in regards to the reason you came all the way to this country, Cardinal.”

“My reason for coming here?” the old clergyman replied suspiciously, sounding cautious.

Sudou grinned at him and played his trump card. “Yes, the man who has been causing trouble up north.”

Sudou's words immediately lifted the alcohol-induced haze from Cardinal Roland's mind. Who Sudou was referring to didn't require any clarification; the church's delegation had come here to investigate Ryoma Mikoshiba, ruler of the Wortenia Peninsula. However, very few people knew that this was the real purpose of their journey. That small group included the pope, who'd ordered them to look into him, Cardinal Roland, and only a handful of others. And no one who knew this could have possibly leaked that information to Sudou.

It can't be... How?

The man sitting in front of the cardinal knew something he couldn't possibly be aware of. All traces of friendship or affection for Sudou vanished from Cardinal Roland's eyes, and a dangerous glint took their place. These weren't the eyes of a clergyman.

Cardinal Roland's glare did little to shake Sudou's composed smile, though. Sudou kept grinning at the cardinal as the two stared wordlessly at each other.



In the end, Cardinal Roland heaved a deep sigh. “How do you know about that?” he asked.

“I’ll just say that being aware of things I have no possible way of knowing is part of my job and leave it at that,” Sudou replied with his usual calm tone. “But my objective is the same as yours, and that’s why I came to visit you. We have been friends for some twenty years now, haven’t we?”

Sudou’s response could have easily been interpreted as mocking, but Cardinal Roland suppressed the anger rising from the pit of his stomach. Their long friendship was one reason he’d done so, but more importantly, they supposedly shared the same objective. A small sigh escaped his lips, and the enmity drained from his eyes, proving that he’d taken an interest in Sudou.

“Very well. I have much to ask you, Sir Sudou, but it has been a long time since we last met, my friend. I’m not sure if I’ll be able to be of much help to you, but I can, at the very least, speak of this common objective of ours.”

Cardinal Roland smiled at Sudou.

Before long, the sun sank below the horizon, and the veil of night settled over the capital. Having finished his talk with Cardinal Roland, Sudou was walking along a back alley.

Hm... Someone is tailing me, it seems. Two...no, three people.

Sudou could faintly feel the gazes fixed on him from behind. Their presence was so indistinct that no one but Sudou could have possibly noticed them. It seemed the spies Cardinal Roland sent to track him were quite skilled. Given that he didn’t feel any bloodlust emanating from them, they must have been ordered to track and gather information on him.

It makes sense he’d do that.

Their exchange had continued and ended exactly as Sudou had planned it, and Cardinal Roland had agreed to follow Sudou’s plan, though not by choice. From the cardinal’s perspective, Sudou might not have coerced him per se, but it had felt like he didn’t have much of a choice. In other words, it was too good of an offer to pass up, so he wasn’t likely to refuse.

The cardinal hadn't sent these spies to follow Sudou out of hostility. After all, Sudou had never exposed how dangerous he could be until today. The cardinal was merely being cautious because an old friend had suddenly revealed an unexpected side he'd never seen before.

That made him wary of me. He was a very convenient pawn for learning what the church was up to, though.

Sudou had to reveal his fangs like that; otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to move the conversation in the direction he wanted. But it had surprised Roland greatly. A friend he'd known for two decades had displayed such a dangerous side to himself, which was why he was having Sudou trailed. But Sudou had good reason to put in so much effort.

"Either way, everything is in place now," Sudou whispered.

Ryoma Mikoshiba was like a blessing to Sudou. While Ryoma did constantly foil the Organization's plans, the more he struggled, the more this continent bled. He spread chaos and ruin, and that was everything Sudou wanted and more. The destruction Ryoma created was so significant that it was enough to cancel out the damage he caused by getting in the Organization's way. Nevertheless, Sudou wasn't pleased that Ryoma continued to expand his power and influence.

Sudou already had a grasp on Queen Lupis's actions, and knew that the House of Lords was poised to act too. To them, Ryoma was a dangerous thorn in their side, and war would soon break out between him and the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. But Sudou also knew that Ryoma had predicted this and taken measures to defend himself.

This was fine, of course. Sudou didn't care much who won the upcoming war.

But I can't allow the Ivory Goddess of War to join his side. That would throw the game off balance.

Games were only interesting when the enemy was appropriately strong, but an opponent that was too powerful took all the fun out of it. A balance had to be maintained.

I've taken such a liking to him that it'd be a waste if I can't have fun with him

for long.

Sudou sneered. This world was a boring, stifling place. Nothing had value or significance. There was one exception, however, one time when he could relish being here—when his plots caused the death and bloodshed of many. Those moments were the only things that roused Akitake Sudou from his ennui and tedium.

The hustle and bustle of the street brimming with people soon reached his ears. The pleasure districts were always alive with activity at night.

Now then, I think it's time I shook off these bothersome spies.

Sudou glanced behind him one last time before slipping into the crowd and disappearing from sight.

On that day, a single force of malice was unleashed—an invisible hatred which, unbeknownst to anyone, would bring further strife and conflict upon the Kingdom of Rhoadseria. And the only one who knew of it was the creator of the malice, Sudou Akitake.

Afterword

I doubt there are many such readers left, but I welcome any new readers who picked up the series with this volume. And to those of you who have kept up with the series since volume 1, it's been four months since the last volume. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

Volume 14 has been successfully published. There's only a month and a half left before the first year of the Reiwa era comes to a close. How did you spend this year? As this is the final volume released this year, I would like to take a second to look back.

Personally, this year was remarkable because of how much I recovered from the poor health that plagued me. I believe that can be attributed to my going to the gym daily and going out on walks as I play *Pokemon Go*. I was able to maintain my pace of three volumes per year for *Record of Wortenia War* too!

The manga version is also releasing at a steady pace, with volume 5 being published just this September, and the web novel has exceeded one hundred million views. Talk of an anime adaptation would be very tempting right about now, but I suppose that's being too greedy...

If my private life was a bit more fulfilling, everything would be perfect, but overall this wasn't a bad year at all.

Now then, let's go as per our usual itinerary and touch on this volume's highlights.

This volume concludes the war with Count Salzberg, bringing the long-running disturbance in the north to a close. There are still some dangling plot lines and foreshadowing for future events, so I'm sure some readers are wondering if it's really over, but from my perspective, this part of the story indeed concludes in this volume. Robert and Signus's relationship, full of both love and hatred, ventures to interesting places, so do look forward to it.

In addition, Koichiro's plotline, which reached a head last volume, comes to

fruition in this one. You can look forward to seeing it develop in exciting ways as well. Rodney and Menea are also involved this time around, so I hope you enjoy it.

Moreover, Sudou appears, spinning his plots for the first time in a while. Personally, Sudou is one of my favorite characters, and I wish he could show up in the story more. It's hard to find the right balance for him, though. I mean, his shady nature and how he always seems to be scheming is simply great!

That said, *Wortenia* is the kind of work where everyone seems to be up to something, isn't it? Even Princess Lupis, who seemed so pure and sincere when she first appeared, has completely crossed into the dark side thanks to Ryoma. Realistically speaking, a country's ruler can't remain pure and spotless forever, but even I have to marvel at how pessimistic this world I created can be.

Anyway, volume 14 is where one mystery beckons another. If all goes according to schedule, volume 15 is set to release in March of next year. I'm already working hard on it, so do look forward to it.

Lastly, I'd like to thank everyone involved with the release of this novel and, most of all, the readers who picked up this book. Please continue supporting *Record of Wortenia War*!

Bonus Short Story

Veronica Kozlova's Dream

Having concluded her meeting with Koichiro, Veronica fixed her gaze on Zheng Motoku's back as he led her down the corridor to a room in the Mars Pavilion.

Nothing's changed. He's the same as he was that night we spent together.

At a glance, Motoku's body looked extremely slender, but Veronica knew that beneath his butler's uniform lay muscles as hard as steel.

There had been a point in their lives when the two of them frequently made love. There wasn't an inch of Motoku's body that Veronica's pale fingers hadn't touched, and the same could be said of Motoku and her body. Veronica's best memory was when they stayed at an inn and watched a meteor shower from a lakeshore. Just recalling the sweet moments of that night was enough to make her flush all over.

Am I being too emotional?

Veronica felt a bit disgusted with herself. She wasn't still a young girl drowning in romantic dreams. No one could fault her for those emotions, though. After all, she was once an operative for the SVR, and she'd worked with intelligence, often encountering all sorts of state secrets. Because of that, she'd had to be extremely cautious when entering romantic relationships.

"Honeytrap" was the word used to describe a female operative seducing a male target to draw information out of them. Seduction was by no means limited to women, however. Whether the term applied only to women, there were certainly cases where male operatives seduced female targets for information. For this reason, anyone affiliated with an intelligence agency was trained to avoid falling prey to such tactics. The training also gave one a keen eye for appraising people.

During the time Veronica worked in the SVR, she hadn't had any lovers to speak of. Still, that wasn't to say she'd had no relationships at all. She was a beautiful woman, and men were bound to flock to her like bees to nectar. But spending time with men and forming a relationship with one were much different. It came down to whether one wished to marry and have children with that person. When she lived in her old world, Veronica had never met a man that made her want that commitment.

But if it's with Motoku...

Veronica would be hard pressed to detail how Zheng Motoku was different from other men, but she could say with certainty that there was definitely something about him that set him apart from any other man alive. That "something" showed Veronica a dream she'd once cast aside—a peaceful life together with a beloved husband, surrounded by their children.

Yet that dream could never come to pass.

He's the only bit of bliss I've felt from being summoned to this world.

Some people never met the love of their life, so compared to them, Veronica was both lucky and privileged. Nevertheless, being pulled into this world was the same as being cast into hell, especially for Motoku and Veronica, two commanding figures in the organization that manipulated the western continent from the shadows. Given their positions, the most they could do was meet in the dead of night for a secret tryst. They could never marry.

"What's wrong, Veronica? Something on your mind?"

Motoku, who was walking ahead, had stopped at some point and turned to look at her. They'd reached their destination—the thick oak door before them.

"It's nothing, Motoku," she said, shaking her head. "Let's go, then."

Veronica held her tongue, knowing that telling Motoku how she felt would only cause him needless trouble.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Count Winzer's Estate](#)

[Chapter 2: Betrayal and Friendship](#)

[Chapter 3: A Warrior's Way of Life](#)

[Chapter 4: The House of Lords](#)

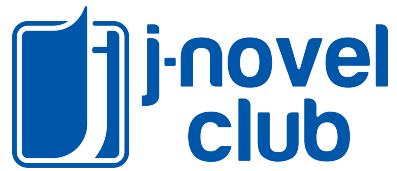
[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Short Story](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 14

by Ryota Hori

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Ebook edition 1.0: February 2022

Premium E-Book